

Keynote: Social mobility and the EPQ

Speakers: Professor Abigail Harrison-Moore (Professor of History of Art and Museum Studies, University of Leeds); Dr Emma Thompson (Learn with US Transition Leader, University of Southampton)

Introduction

ET: Welcome everybody, we would have loved to have been doing this with you in person. You know, doing our keynote speech that we had planned for our conference. Sadly, due to circumstances that isn't possible. So myself and Abigail, Professor Abigail Harrison Moore from the University of Leeds have put a little video together for you so that you can still enjoy the experience that we would have provided, so I'm just going to let Abigail introduce herself first and then I'll say a little bit more about what I do at Southampton.

AHM: So, hi everybody lovely to be sort of with you. I'm Abigail Harrison Moore. I'm a Professor of Art History and Museum Studies at the University of Leeds. I've been there about 26 years now and when I arrived the first job I was given was admissions tutor like they always do and through my whole career at the University, I've been actively involved in thinking with teachers and with young people about the skills and their wishes and their hopes for the future in terms of going onto University education, so as a part of that, a while back I started working on a project for the University around the Extended Project Qualification because having discovered it, I thought it was just what had been missing in schools, and through that I met the lovely Emma and since then Leeds and Southampton have been collaborating to provide you with as much knowledge as we can get for you about this thing we call the Extended Project Qualification, so that's me.

ET: OK, and as Abigail said, we met through kind of shared interests, in that the programme that I lead at Southampton is one whereby we look to work with students in sixth form to support them in developing the kinds of research and academic skills that we know - that Abigail and I know as academics – that students will need in order to flourish once they get to University, and that's why we are both so passionate about the EPQ because we see it as a really useful vehicle to be able to achieve that aim, so that's kind of where we're coming from and what we wanted to do in our keynote speech at this year's conference where we are joining forces, the two universities, we wanted to talk around how the EPQ can be used as a positive for social mobility and widening participation. So I'm just going to open some slides now that we're just going to kind of talk through as we go through the presentation.

Keynote Presentation

Slide 1

AHM: So why are we talking about social mobility and the EPQ today? Well, it's something that Emma and I have been discussing for a long time, and what we're really interested in is supporting you to think about how the EPQ can help bridge the gaps that we see in terms of educational experience, education, opportunity, and educational attainment. Depending on a young person's background, depending on where they come from, what the situation of their life is in, and what we're going to focus on today is thinking about how Covid and [...] lockdown has made that situation worse.

But I want us to start in looking at some of the research that was done prior to lockdown, and there's a research report that was commissioned by the Education Endowment Fund as part of the Sutton Trust in 2015 called 'subject to background' and this report has really informed a lot of my thinking about why the EPQ is so very valuable and yet actually within the report they don't really focus on that at all. What they're focused on is the difference in terms of experience between young people who have similar ability and that's key, they have similar academic ability and yet because of the type of school they go to because of where their school is within the country, within a particular region, they have very, very different experiences in terms of what we would sometimes call 'extracurricular' - those opportunities to enrich the academic experience, be that through debating, theatre, sport, all the different outings, trips... all the different things that the independent schools are able to offer because of the type of schools they are, and a lot of state schools increasingly not able to offer.

And of course I'm also wanting to read this against the fact that we're all very aware that in the last number of years, particularly since the introduction of the EBacc, and I'm very aware of this working within the creative subjects, as being a huge impact on what is actually even available within the curriculum for young people in certain sorts of school. So, I live in Yorkshire, my daughter goes to the same state school that I went to when I was younger and I work as a governor of one of the largest independent schools in the North. I also work with schools across the city centre of Leeds and I can see the massive difference in the options prior to Covid, the opportunities that students were getting through their schools; absolutely dependent on where they went to.

The EBacc, as I say, made that particularly more challenging because once we started measuring schools on the basis of just three Sciences, Maths, English, a language and Humanities, Geography, or History, certain subjects that I would say develop the life skills that we're looking for in young people, whether that's through higher education or going into employment were taken out of the curriculum,

or at least given less time within the curriculum. If we look at the way timetables have changed over the last few years, so subjects like Art, Music, Drama, Philosophy - all the subjects that many of us working as teachers and in Higher Education benefited from ourselves. They were the subjects that challenge us, engaged us, that gave us our futures have not been given as much time in the curriculum and I think obviously I've been at home with a Year 10 child and we've been both sitting and working and I've become more and more aware even though she's got great teachers, she's at a really good school - she is essentially learning at the moment by wrote quite a lot of the time. So, she gets given something to learn – a PowerPoint or workbook, she then learns it and then she repeats that within a testing system and inevitably, and you know this is not in any way to disrespect my daughter or any other child in the school system in the UK at the moment, she often feels that she's learning to pass the test and then she forgets that learning.

So, the sorts of educational experience that we know can really help bridge the gap, those education experiences both within the classroom and outside the classroom have been being taken away more and more in the last few years. So this was the situation in 2015.

Slide 2

AHM: If we look at some more of the research from this report in order to set our context, you can see that they were very much clearly saying at that time that economic and educational inequality is hindering social mobility, and decreases the chances of poor children achieving the same levels of academic success as their more advantaged peers. And when they talk about advantage, these kids are doing the same sort of GCSE curriculum, but they're looking at everything that goes beyond the EBacc curriculum. So, whether that's within those subjects that are more and more available and at the moment we are seeing schools starting to talk about cutting subjects in September as a result of the lockdown so that children can focus on the EBacc subjects. So again, that chance to do their subjects that we see is developing the skills that we feel and that many different research reports have identified as crucial in terms of going forward in life, in terms of getting advantages in life, in terms of being able to talk to the world about what you bring to the world are no longer there, either in the classroom or outside the classroom in a number of schools. And these are the skills that we see very much being developed by the EPQ and the Year 10/11 version of that, the HPQ.

Slide 3

ET: So you know, this is something that Abigail and I have been concerned about for a number of years. You know, both working in education and particularly, from my perspective, seeing that students do

struggle with the transition to University level study at the best of times. Least of all when they have had disruption to their study. And I think we can all agree that the current pandemic has represented the most significant disruption, as Anne Longfield said, since the Second World War. This is a really unusual - we hear it all the time - unprecedented time which has actually served to exacerbate the problem, make those gaps that we are endeavouring to narrow potentially increase, and that's because of the variation in learning. We know that not all students will have the same level of access to online content, and there's a huge variation between providers. That's not just a state/independent divide. There's also, within those sectors, a divide in terms of what students are enjoying.

There's data from UCAS as well to suggest that there are significant proportions of Year 12 students who haven't had any contact with teachers beyond those taught sessions that they might be having. All of that interaction that they would otherwise have with those staff seems to have disappeared, and there's certainly some concerning statistics there that you can see on the screen, particularly around '90% of disadvantaged children aren't going online for more than two hours', which compared to other students is significantly lower.

Slide 4

ET: So this is not just backed up by Anne Longfield, there is also research - early research - that has come out, primarily this slide I will show you from the NFER. Again expressing the concern, particularly for students who are considered more disadvantaged because of their lack of access to IT. Not just IT but also quiet spaces. I'm sure we've all struggled with this in our homes, but particularly so for these types of students. And teachers are really concerned, particularly about the engagement of students who don't have that space, those who have special educational needs and disabilities, or might be pupil premium, or might even be young carers as well, so that's some early research from them, which is also backed up by some further research from the Education Endowment [Fund].

Slide 5

ET: Their key Headlines - number one and number three, I think were really important in this context. This is really backing up what Anne Longfield said that this disruption looks set to reverse the progress that we have striven to make over a decade. So it's really challenging times within widening participation. And there's definitely a role that I think we all play as educators, both in higher education and in schools and colleges as we see a period of time that we're going to need to focus on for a number of years to support that 'catch up' for all students, but particularly so for disadvantaged students. And their research is suggesting that yes, sustained catch up provision is going to be

necessary. Of course we know that schools and colleges are doing a huge amount of work already to do that, but it's not just going to be one answer. There's going to be a need for a number of different solutions, and this really is where we feel the EPQ comes in as a solution.

We already understand it as a solution for this in general, but particularly at this time. I'm gonna let Abigail talk through some of the work around the importance of skills and how then we see the EPQ feeding into that.

Slide 6

AHM: So if we look again a second piece of research commissioned by the Sutton Trust, the Education Endowment [Fund] 'Life Lessons', and this was a piece of work that really explored the difference in terms of access to skills development in different types of schools, and as often with some of the Sutton Trust research, they did a comparison between the skills that were being developed in independent schools and the skills that were being developed in state schools, despite all the work that state schools in the UK have been trying to do and they identified a large gap between the types of skills and the range of skills, and they were talking about things like... I'm struck every day - when I was at school I had no confidence whatsoever. It was going to a University that I had to find my voice, essentially because I realised that everybody around me - who had all been to private schools, I'd been to a state school - had already found, you know... they seemed to know everything, and yet it wasn't that, it was just simply they'd found their voice, confidence and the ability to communicate, to be motivated to go out and find and seek challenges and complete tasks, to work with other peer groups. And this is something obviously through lockdown, a lot of kids haven't been able to do. They've had to work very independently. They haven't had that peer group support and they haven't had the opportunity to socially interact beyond maybe what they can do on their phones themselves.

And I think this is, you know, again, this is where we're seeing that Covid has exacerbated something that we're already aware of in our education system and as 'life lessons' said, these are the skills that should lie at the heart of our education system. Because these are the skills that we see being used every day in all the different professions within the UK. Whether that be Medicine, the Arts, Law... and as we've been seeing over the last few years in these professions, state school children are underrepresented in comparison to independent school children. So, prior to Covid we were seeing that there needed to be a way within school to develop the skills, and not to simply rely on extracurricular activities which a lot of schools can't do. I mean, the situation is that doing after school

activities relies on someone being able to go and collect the child because the buses... the free places on the buses have gone at the end of the day, and for a lot of parents that's just not a possibility.

Slide 7

AHM: So where can we embed this skills development in the curriculum itself? And this is where we turn to the EPQ and the HPQ because as we will look in more detail through this talk, the qualification really does encourage and reward these sorts of essential life skills - confidence, motivation, resilience, communication. I mean, we've been talking a lot about the really negative situation that is coming out as a result of Covid, but I do think - and this is something that I say to my colleagues on a daily basis at the moment - I do think for those children who were coming through Years 10 particularly at the moment, and Years 11, by the time they get to us at University, will have learned to be independent learners in a far different way to what I've seen in the last 5 to 10 years, at the University at the moment, because I think one of the things that our children have had to do is they've had to manage their education themselves in a way that they have not been able to in an environment... like an EBacc environment in schools at the moment. So maybe we will see some benefits from lockdown, but we need to encourage them to continue to develop those skills of time management, of independence, of motivation, and also to continue developing skills of confidence and communication, because we know that that is what is missing. And we know that schools need to teach that it's not just enough to rely on it to be something that's delivered within the home, or through extracurricular activities. And this is where the EPQ could be really useful.

ET: Yeah, I think that quote you can see at the bottom of the page there 'giving young people from all backgrounds a greater opportunity to develop these skills' that we've both talked about can therefore be an engine for opportunity and social mobility. That was a quote that resonated so much with both of us because that's absolutely what we want to be able to do, and it provides such an obvious segue to the EPQ.

Slide 8

ET: So most of you, I imagine, who will be watching this video are probably quite familiar with the EPQ, but for those of you who aren't, I really want to draw out why we think the EPQ speaks to that agenda that we've already addressed. And really it is because this is at the heart of what the EPQ seeks to examine. So when we look at the assessment objectives, although we understand that the EPQ is a piece of project work that students will complete, whether it is a 5000 word essay, whether it's a report, whether it's an artefact, whether that is a performance or something that they make, or even

a design if it's not possible for them to make it, we very much look at it holistically. The exam boards mark it in that way, they moderate it in that way and it sees students perform under four different assessment objectives.

The first thing - the management of the project and this I think, actually picking up on what Abigail has said, will tie into what they've already been learning to do in lockdown, and that is that self-management. They'll be tested to do this further, they'll need to identify something that they are passionate about, something that they want to explore further, they will need to shape their own time. They need to look at everything that they need to do in order to see a project through to fruition and map that across the time that they have available, as well as really doing some in-depth research to establish what is feasible as a project, what is feasible as a research question which they then seek to address through their use of resources. You go about doing independent research and at the moment we know that that is quite difficult. But there is also more available online by way of resources - much more is Open Access at the moment, so this is a good time for them to be doing it as well, so it's not only how they go about collecting resources, it's also how they engage with those sources and it's that thing that we know equip them really well for University and those life skills, moreover, that we've already talked about - applying information in a relevant way, really, really important. Develop and realise, that third one, is worth an important 40% of the marks that they will accrue through doing the EPQ and this is where we really do get to see all of those things that Abigail and I have mentioned where we can see the development of a skill set, whether that is their writing skills, their referencing skills, their ability to structure work, manage time, but also that they are able to persevere through this large piece of work. And finally, that they are able to review and reflect upon what they have learned, not just in terms of content, but again, acknowledging that skill set. I think we know working with students in Higher Education, that sometimes it is those students who are aware of their skill set more than anything who also tend to do really, really well 'cause they know what they've got and they know how to use it.

Slide 9

And it's the kind of things that you can see on the screen there. So, these I feel are some of the things they will take away, but perhaps aren't prescribed within the assessment objectives, but are very much the kinds of things that I have seen students take away and absolutely the kinds of things that I know when we mark academic pieces of work we want to see - that skill set, and that ability shine through.

We know that you are doing a huge amount in educating students in schools and colleges, and we've talked a lot about widening participation and social mobility. That is a higher education agenda, but we feel it really ties in nicely with the agenda of schools, particularly in thinking about OFSTED.

Slide 10

AHM: So obviously when we're working in schools, as much as we want to talk about all the wonderful things that we can do, we are always hyper aware - despite there being a little pause on inspections - of the inspection culture that we find ourselves living with. And whether it's OFSTED or the Independent Schools Inspectorate, what they're looking for is something that we have to be consistently aware of how we develop it. And again, this is where we want to come back to the EPQ, but also come back to this challenge around social mobility.

So, I've been working with a group of teachers and educational specialists in the last few months to take OFSTED's inspection framework from September, which was published in September 2019, and particularly the sentence that they put in there, as a result I very much believe, of Amanda Spielman aiming to try and reverse some of the problems that have occurred as result of the EBacc curriculum, and particularly the way that a number of schools, number of Academy trusts have read what the DfE wanted and seen it very much rather than as broadening and balancing the curriculum as Spielman is always talking about, it's actually taking away aspects of the curriculum. And again, Spielman has talked a lot about the importance of the creative subjects, but we've seen again and again in schools where they're only going to be assessed and measured upon the EBacc subjects, removing those creative subjects from the curriculum.

And as I said, if the report's to be understood at the moment, we are seeing schools preparing to re-open in September with a much, much smaller opportunity for young people to encounter subjects, so down to five or six subjects in some schools and removing the opportunity for young people to discover their future through all different sorts of subjects through a broad, unbalanced curriculum. So in the September framework, one of the things that OFSTED did was they talked about the need – and I always think it's important they said leaders, so this is not about the teachers. This is about the school leaders needing to demonstrate that they have taken on or constructed a curriculum that's ambitious and designed to give all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged, and those with special educational needs or disabilities or high needs the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life, and this is a sentence that really struck me for two reasons. One, I saw it as opening a door that had seemed to have been shut to us for a long time, to the subjects I'm absolutely

passionate about - to Art History, to Drama, to Music, to Philosophy. These subjects that engage us in thinking creatively about who we are and where we are within the world and gets us to think about the way that we might make a difference within the world that we live within, and develop those skills that we've been talking about through this presentation.

But also it really struck me because I, for the last however many years at Leeds, have been teaching Pierre Bourdieu's theory of 'cultural capital' and I've not been teaching in a positive way. I've been talking about the problem of his ideas that came about in the 1960s and 70s through looking at Art Gallery's, particularly in France, but across Europe around the idea of how cultural capital is something that we're not born with, it's something that's taught to us. But when he talked about cultural capital and when others have talked about cultural capital, they talk very much about an elite cultural capital, the cultural capital of great art, of masterpieces. All this sort of stuff that I've been spending a long time with my colleagues critiquing and questioning because within that cultural capital - where are the women? Where are the people of colour? Where are people who represent actually most of us in the population? So as well as being an opening of a door, it also potentially, handled badly, could be a massive shutting of a door. It could mean that schools would think that to give cultural capital all we have to do is arrange a school trip to go and see a play by Shakespeare. And that's actually not what's going to make a difference. So working with a group of Teachers, we developed a key which you see here. And this is available through Twitter. It's available as a poster that you can put on the wall of your classroom that just takes this concept of cultural capital and develops it as something that is about young people owning it themselves. It's actually going back to the beginnings of the word cultural and the word capital... Looking at etymology and looking actually how the words come through concepts of health, of wellbeing, and growth, and how we can actually use this positively within the classroom.

And for me, working with the EPQ and working with teachers delivering the EPQ, and working with young people having done the EPQ, I see all these good things around cultural capital, around sharing histories, around memories, around things that matter to us, around creating curiosity and confidence, around growth, around communication, around being part of a community is all there within the requirements of the EPQ. It's about finding what matters to a young person and helping them develop and explore and research their own cultural capital. And that actually will help them, give them the confidence, but also the skills to succeed in life, which is why when we're looking at this question of social mobility, we are passionate about how this one qualification can really make a difference. It's not the be all and end all, but it can really make a difference in how you deliver that in

the classroom and how you persuade school leaders to give you the support to deliver this from the classroom can actually tick so many different boxes in terms of what we want for our young people's educational experience.

We want education to open doors for them, and that's why we think that the EPQ is one of those 'key' keys to get us through those doors.

ET: So ordinarily, we would of course now open the floor for questions from yourselves. Sadly, we're not able to do that but there are contact details at the end whereby you can continue this conversation, and we certainly hope to see you this time next year, ideally in person. And we do see this very much as an ongoing conversation, so thank you so much for listening and just a quick goodbye from both of us.

AHM: Thank you bye.