

Hills Road Sixth Form College, Cambridge

Inspiring and motivating all students with
OCR's Extended Project Qualification



Hills Road Sixth Form College in Cambridge offers a wide range of AS and A Level courses together with an extensive and varied programme of enrichment and extra-curricular activities for around 2,000 students aged 16-19. One of the College's courses, compulsory for all full-time students, is OCR's Extended Project (EPQ); a qualification that aims to inspire, enthuse and motivate students by giving them the freedom to undertake a project on any subject they are studying or in an area of personal interest. Students spend their time focused on a skills-based piece of work that can be a design, a performance, a report with findings from an investigation, a made artefact (such as a book or working model) or a dissertation.

In many schools and colleges, the EPQ is an optional module, however, Hills Road recognises that the qualification provides students with the opportunity to work independently and creatively, whilst developing valuable skills that universities and employers look for and which helps students stand out from the crowd. The College set itself quite a challenge by taking a compulsory approach to EPQ for all students.

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“In the past four years we've put over 3,000 students through the EPQ and it is quite unlike any other course that we offer at the College,” explains Nicola Dartnell, Curriculum Director and Head of Extended Curriculum at Hills Road. “The choice of topic is entirely up to each student in consultation with the teaching staff.”

“Some are very clear about what they want to do because they have an idea already or a strong interest in something; others will genuinely not have a clue and need to think about it some more.”

When it comes to marking, Nicola explains: “The volume and variety of topics means that marking can be an enjoyable experience as no one project is ever quite the same. One moment you're focusing on a Cub Scout Book or a Japan Day, the next you're assessing a pop-up restaurant or even a loft extension!”

The College offers EPQs to all students through a mentor programme where teachers help to guide and support students with their topics from day one. Nicola explains: “We begin the EPQ with the taught element which covers areas such as how to choose a topic, project management and time management skills, how to conduct research, and how to evaluate, present and promote it. This helps to set them on their way and is an important aspect of the qualification, but mentors – all of the tutors at Hills Road – are on hand to help students.”

Mentors are non-specialists in that they need not have any particular expertise in a topic that a student has chosen. This keeps them open minded about the choice of topic and how they can help.

During the course, students are internally assessed on how they progress through their project across four distinct assessment areas:

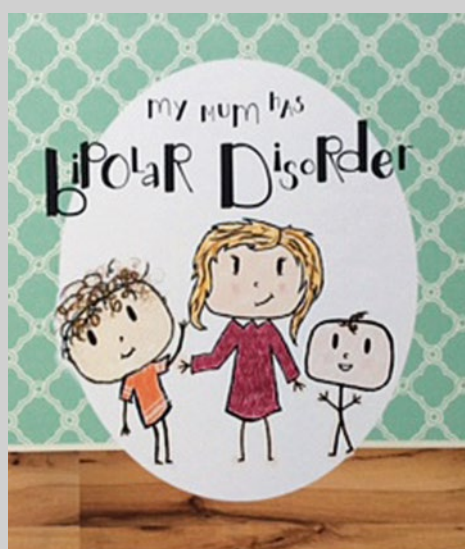


- Plan – from initial idea to final outcome
- Manage – researching and gathering information
- Do – developing and realising a project
- Review – reviewing and evaluating a project.

Students are encouraged to develop and improve their own learning and performance as critical, reflective and independent thinkers as well as developing and applying decision-making and problem-solving skills to their task.

“Some students are very confident or they may be highly motivated by their choice of topic whereas others may need more hand holding, especially at the beginning of their EPQ,” says Nicola. “The learning structure is there to support both – if we’re confident that a student is out there doing the right things and we don’t need to see them for, say, two weeks, that’s ok. Equally, we have students that do need more time from their mentors or benefit from more of the taught element of the EPQ.”

One of the major benefits of taking an OCR EPQ is that it enables students to develop many of the qualities and skills needed for further study, adult life and work. “Many of our students are motivated by their EPQ because it’s great for their university applications,” explains Nicola. “We know that certain universities are more attracted to our students because of their EPQ and that’s great for them, our students and the college.”



Beth Hart, 18 – My Mum has Bipolar Disorder

Beth Hart and Jonah Balmford, both 18 years old, have completed their EPQ and in each case they decided to research, design and produce a book.

“The first I heard of the EPQ is when I attended the assembly at the beginning and we learned all about it,” explains Beth. “It was very different from the other A Levels I was studying, including chemistry and biology. I’d dropped English after GCSE and also dropped Art in Year 9 – the EPQ offered me the chance to work on something creative that really appealed to me.”

Beth decided to look into what sort of educational books there were for children about bipolar disorder and discovered there were lots of books on the market about stress and anxiety, but only a couple on bipolar.

“I knew that I wanted it to be a children’s book,” Beth explains, “and my choice was influenced by potentially wanting to study psychiatry. I was also influenced by my mum working for the NSPCC.”

Beth began with secondary research, looking at books and papers, and then completed primary research among family members who work in health care roles.

Beth created a book for children, that told the story of what to expect when you are living with a parent with bipolar, such as mood swings and medication. Once Beth completed writing the story, she drew her own illustrations that brought the characters of the story to life.

“One of the things I really liked about the EPQ was the freedom to learn,” comments Beth. “It was difficult to get started, but once I was into it I found it really inspiring and quite scary at the same time!”

Jonah Balmford, 18 – Easy as Pi

Jonah reached a decision relatively quickly about the type of project he wanted to undertake. “Having seen my brother complete his EPQ, I already had some knowledge of what it was all about.”

The EPQ presented Jonah with the chance to do something quite different from his other A Levels – Maths, Geography and Biology.

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Beth Hart

“I was really pleased with the response. I had chefs emailing and calling me saying they would be happy to help out.”

Jonah Balmford



“I’m interested in maths, and I’ve also baked from a young age, so I decided to produce a book that was all about living on a budget,” says Jonah. “My idea was to produce a book about pies that cost less than the value of ‘pi’ – £3.14. I did some research and there was nothing on the market with this angle.”

Coming from a family with a strong appreciation of food, and with a mum and dad interested in celebrity chefs and their cooking, Jonah hit on the idea of contacting well-known chefs and inviting them to contribute to his book, titled Easy As Pi.

Jonah contacted 45 celebrity chefs. “I was really pleased with the response. I had chefs emailing and calling me saying they would be happy to help out,” he explains.

Household names, including Antony Worrall Thompson, Yotam Ottolenghi, Michel Roux Jr, Phil Vickery, as well as MasterChef TV celebrity, Gregg Wallace, were up for the challenge, among others.

Jonah also cooked and taste tested the pies on himself, family and friends. “I did a lot of baking and eventually settled on 15 recipes for the book,” he explains.

Jonah wrote and designed the book, produced publication quality pictures on his iPhone and had the book published in paper, PDF and e-book formats. It has since been promoted by several of the contributing chefs and he has also started selling copies. “What I’ve most enjoyed about my project is communicating with the chefs and getting an end product at the end of it,” enthuses Jonah. “I’ve also really enjoyed the process as I generally prefer coursework and there are no exams to sit. You also get a lot of freedom and I really liked that.”

Jonah says that he could not have predicted the success that it would eventually bring. However, he did see the qualification as another string to his bow when applying for a place at university, as he explains: “The EPQ has been one of the most rewarding projects that I’ve ever been involved with and has definitely helped with university applications. It has certainly opened up more opportunities to me than I might have had without it.”

www.blurb.com/b/5403654-easy-as-pi

Summary

Hills Road Sixth Form College is extremely satisfied with how the EPQ provides its students with creative, imaginative and independent skills that they can use in their future studies and careers.

“The final outcome isn’t the most important part of the qualification,” comments Nicola. “That’s not really a message that you want to send out at the start because students will understandably be keen to see their ideas and hard work come to fruition, but the key aspect is the progressive learning along the way – this is really the whole point of the EPQ.”

Contact

Find out more about OCR’s
Extended Project Qualification

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