

1. What inspired you to choose your dissertation topic and how did you narrow down your focus?

Choosing a dissertation topic was an exploratory process that began soon after my second year summer exams. Extremely inspired by previous students' dissertations, I was excited by the prospect of being able to conduct my own independent research. I spent a lot of time trying to find a topic from which I could create a dissertation that was original, and thought provoking enough to fascinate my readers. **During lectures, I carried a notebook with me to scribble down any topics which had inspired me, and kept a notes section on my phone for any encounters on the go.** I ended up with a plethora of different, diverse ideas, however these did not develop into feasible project proposals. **After consulting with my dissertation advisor, I decided to focus my efforts on one topic to which I could personally connect – namely, the transition many young people faced from education to the workplace.**

Upon reaching my final year, my attention had begun to turn to life after university, and what types of careers I would like to pursue. I had noticed how popular media often made generalised claims about the types of working lives young people, like myself, now desired in contrast to their parents. Additionally, many graduate employers I had interacted with at recruitment fairs seemed interested in understanding students' views on the workplace – yet condensed these into neat pie charts and statistics to print in their brochures. **I realised a strong fixation in quantifying graduate transitions into the labour market, which failed to explore the voices of students' themselves. I felt this an excellent opportunity to explore the topic further through a geographical lens, and decided to focus my dissertation on examining how students, like myself, set about navigating the upcoming transition beyond university life.**

Connecting an issue which had arisen from my everyday experiences to the geographical literature was key in narrowing my topic focus and generating original research questions. I discovered an area of youth geographies which had already begun exploring the growing non-linearity of pathways to an adult identity. This led me to discover new research avenues and concepts, including 'student geographies' (examining higher education transitions in the global south), and 'emotional geographies' (highlighting the politics of raising young, working class children's' aspirations toward university). However, **I noted a gap in the literature, whereby little research had been undertaken in examining the negotiation of exits from higher education in a UK context, particularly within institutions considered 'elite'. As a result, I decided to spend time exploring my own university, interviewing students to understand what 'work' meant to them, how they envisaged their future lives, and to what extent the university impacted their decisions.** Focusing my study in this way enabled my dissertation to uncover a diversity of views within a student community assumed homogenised through their inclusion in a Russell Group university, highlighting the value of qualitatively exploring student voices as higher education becomes an increasingly mainstream experience.

2. How did you find the dissertation experience? What were the highs and lows (challenges and rewards)?

The dissertation experience was a mix of highs and lows. **At times I felt completely overwhelmed by the task of writing 12,000 words on my topic. On other occasions I discovered an interesting concept that allowed me to reflect on my data in a new way, boosting my confidence, optimism,**

and enthusiasm for the project. Although the most challenging aspect of my degree, it was definitely the most rewarding, as I learnt much more than just how to write a dissertation.

The real challenge for me was understanding and adapting my writing style – which erred on the side of perfection. I soon realised I wasn't going to come up with the 'perfect' topic first time, nor draft an articulate and sophisticated analysis in one sitting. I quickly grasped the project was an iterative process, involving drafting and re-drafting, exploring and reflecting. Trying new writing techniques, such as pomodoro, was helpful, and enabled me to move away from delaying writing chapters until the 'perfect moment' (i.e. when all my reading and notes were completed, and perfectly organised). Often, it was overcoming these challenges which were incredibly rewarding. For instance, breaking down the dissertation into manageable tasks was hugely satisfying, and enabled me to maintain motivation for an undertaking which at first seemed impossible alongside other modules and extra curriculars.

Exploring my own university, and conducting interviews with fellow students, was another 'high' which I found to be an extremely rewarding element of the project. I felt very fortunate that my participants showed a genuine interest in my research and wanted their voices heard, trusting me to speak so candidly about their lives and hopes for the future. **Analysing my data and linking it to the academic theories was also very satisfying - I felt a real sense of empowerment in contributing to a field of research which I found so fascinating. Finally, seeing the project come together after months of hard work, and actually hold a printed, tangible copy in my own hands, was an incredible feeling of accomplishment.**

3. What advice would you give other undergraduate students undertaking a (GCYFRG-related) dissertation?

For me, the dissertation process was not just an academic journey, but a personal one too – I learnt so much about myself, my working style, and my mentality towards new and challenging tasks. It was an invaluable life lesson and gave me skills which I continue to utilise. Some advice I'd give would be:

- **Make the most of your tutors.** They regularly conduct their own research, and support students through the dissertation process every year. Ask them about their own research experiences, and the common pitfalls many experience. Utilise your time with them effectively - arrive to discussions having read extensively, with plenty of questions to discuss, and make action plans at the end of each meeting. Remember you are leading the research, so learning to consult effectively with your advisor is crucial.
- **Realise from the outset that the dissertation is a marathon, not a sprint.** Although this sounds like a horrible cliché, it's important to realise the dissertation is a milestone in your academic career set to test the geographical skills you've acquired. It's a project that will consume a lot of your time and energy, so you need to prepare. Drafting a realistic timetable is important – breaking the project into smaller deadlines over the months will assist in effective time – management, and allow you to commit the time necessary whilst allow you to juggle other life commitments. Although it's important to dedicate yourself to your research, it's just as essential to ensure appropriate self-care. Take (or schedule!) meaningful breaks, re-connecting with friends, or exploring a new green space, to keep your motivation up, and remind yourself there is life after the dissertation!
- **Remain flexible – embrace Plan B and forget perfectionism.** Learn to enjoy the research process and accept that you're not going to get everything right first time. You'll probably spend a lot of time re-drafting - but that's part of the exploratory process and where you'll discover the most interesting insights from your data. You'll also probably fall off schedule, or have unforeseen events occur – for instance, my laptop malfunctioned halfway through my project and had to be completely wiped. Thankfully, backing my project up in multiple places saved me from total disaster. Also be flexible in your approach – listening back on my first pilot interview, I realised my interviewing schedule was eliciting closed responses. By adapting my technique, and practising with friends, I was able to improve my data collection process.

- **Keep a research diary.** At the end of each day I'd write a few lines about my progress, my current thoughts on the project, and where I'd hope to go with it next. Familiarising myself with these notes made it much easier to dip back into my research each time, by quickly getting me up to speed.
- **Find tools which enable you to do your research effectively.** For instance, I used a spreadsheet to log my academic readings and record initial thoughts, utilising the filtering and search functions to quickly find references I had collated. I then complemented this with colour coded mind maps to give me the creative freedom to find linkages between theories, whilst remaining organised and structured.
- **Finally - enjoy the process!** There are many ways to write a fantastic dissertation – find a process and schedule that works for you. Remember to enjoy the process and the research you're conducting.