

Ellie Barker
Youth Activism: Climate and Social Justice in a Time of Crisis
Royal Holloway, University of London

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

During early dissertation meetings, I expressed concern towards the governance of our climate emergency. Aiming to bridge a gap between physical and human geographies, I believed focusing on political natures of climate change— the moral responsibility of more ‘developed’ nations and the extent to which climate change governance and environmental policy is prioritised, successful or negligent across nations— was the way to go. Ideas were very much rooted within my own frustrations and concerns as a young person towards governments, policymakers, corporations and adults in positions of power and their failure to act quickly and effectively enough. After insightful discussions with my supervisor, Rachael Squire, we decided to narrow this focus on youth movements and the concerns young people have during our climate crisis — a motivation which not only grew from my own interest in activism, but sadly the inner anger, disappointment, and powerlessness I felt in a time of major social and environmental inequalities and injustices. After observing an increasing number of young people mobilising and participating in strikes, it felt timely to narrow this focus by finding and remaining conscious of the intersectionalities between marginalised groups, social injustice, and our climate crisis.

Research largely focused on Manchester (my home city), and Stockholm: home of the School Strike for Climate. Both areas provided ample opportunity to observe youth movement characteristics and their concerns and motivations for striking, and sufficient evidence was gathered to begin challenging the frequently unfair undermining of youth agency. Research called for a reconceptualisation of young people as important political agents sufficiently politically engaged to raise awareness for climate and social justice. It was important to me to not only validate and recognise their status as effective political actors— dismantling the ‘apolitical youth’ dogma— in offline spaces, but to also begin uncovering how the online space has been utilised to mobilise and inform young people of the very issues they often fail to be made aware of in schools, the home space, or traditional media. In hindsight, although the challenge of presenting Instagram as a successful tool for knowledge dissemination around our climate emergency and social injustices— plus its role in encouraging millions to attend strikes— was such a large task to take into the hands of an undergraduate given my 10,000 word limit, focusing on this consolidated the need for and justified my call for more academic studies on the utility of the Instagram platform in engaging youth and giving them a space for their voices to be heard.

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

The most rewarding aspect of the dissertation process was that it felt like my own attempt to provide a small contribution to social justice efforts by using it as a way to recognise and validate young people’s concerns and voices. Doing a project that came from a very personal place, my own fears and frustrations, felt like an even bigger achievement when it was finalised. By understanding intersectionalities, dynamics at play, and the complexity and scale of the climate emergency we have on our hands, I was able to discover a wide array of eyeopening literature which showed me there is faith in the ability and agency of young people and also encouraging efforts taken by academics to further understanding of this.

Collecting both primary and secondary data was a process that was incredibly enjoyable and empowering. Walking the streets of Manchester surrounded by young people who seemed

confident, determined, yet sadly frequently fearful for their futures, was an experience that reminded me the task at hand would be enjoyable, worthwhile, and no longer seemed quite so daunting when I remembered the motivation behind it.

I found some difficulty in managing my time whilst balancing other university work and my mental health, and in all honesty this is something I still haven't quite mastered one year on, but the more I broke down the structure of my dissertation into subsections, the calmer the process felt.

3. **What advice would you give other undergraduate students undertaking a (GCYFRG-related) dissertation?**
 1. My most crucial piece of advice is to **find something that you are passionate about**. At first, I jumped into something that frustrated me most (i.e. lack of government action) and realised this wasn't exactly the kind of 'passionate' that was needed. Instead, both myself and my supervisor reflected upon an area that needed more attention paid to it, and an area that offered hope and inspiration for our futures in the form of young people's agency. So take your time finding something you care about, feel passionate towards and enjoy discussing, or feel concerned about and would like to further the research contributions there.
 2. **Break it down!** I found it incredibly easy to feel overwhelmed by the task at hand. Without breaking it down, the scale of the project can seem daunting, but by dividing the task into chapters and subsections with a checklist for each, I found it much easier to handle.
 3. **Data collection.** If you choose to conduct interviews or focus groups, I found it beneficial to plan these as much as possible before conducting them. Consider anything that could go wrong i.e. have more interviewees than you need in case some drop out; a calm, quiet environment to hold your interviews in if this benefits participants, their responses, and yourself; and do remember to have multiple backups in various forms (notes, recordings, videos if necessary or possible). I also found it useful to email the interview to the participant once transcribed to check if they were completely comfortable with the interview to be used in the dissertation.
 4. And finally, **faith and confidence!** Believe in yourself and your abilities, and reach out to your dissertation advisor, other academic staff, friends, family, or the wellbeing team if necessary. The dissertation is frequently held in such high regard before we get to that stage, with a lot of emphasis placed on it— so much so that it may actually increase anxious thoughts and feelings amongst many of us. So do reach out, and remember this isn't a process you have to face in isolation despite some late nights at the library or at your desk!

“By acknowledging climate crisis concerns, young people have accentuated understandings of an increasingly unequal world in a time of environmental disaster. Their concerns prompt recognition that climate change is not simply about avoiding a global crisis, nor is it simply a debate about its scientific basis. What it epitomises is, however, a global injustice threatening the most vulnerable populations — it ought to be a debate about the pursuit of social justice in the context of global scientific agreement (Brooks, 2013). Future contributions to youth geographies must respond to inequalities young people will face in coming decades, particularly with regards to climate change, displacement, economic crises, and conflict (van Blerk, 2019). Climate change may offer new opportunity for unity and solidarity, but it is one of the few issues that will affect everyone on the planet. That said, future research should seek to bridge understandings of young people in the Global South and the Global North by forming new conceptualisations of their efforts to achieve climate justice in a time of crisis (Norgaard, 2009).”