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Studying the Real-World Issue of Climate Change through the Extended Project Qualification

DAISY COLTMAN

ABSTRACT This article is about the process and outcome of carrying out the author's Extended Project Qualification (EPQ). The title of her EPQ was: 'Is It Politically Possible to Keep Global Temperature Rise "Well below 2 °C"?' – using the wording of the Paris Agreement to focus on the temperature threshold that scientists believe is safe for our planet. Detailing the international, national and local levels of politics combatting climate change, the EPQ led the author to research agreements, such as Paris, and national issues, such as the United Kingdom's electricity generation. She discusses the value of the EPQ. It allowed her to explore a real-world issue, which not only made her more engaged in learning, but gave her a greater understanding of the world we live in.

Studying Climate Change through the Extended Project Qualification

The Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) is a Level 3 qualification, increasingly valued by higher education institutions, in which students devise and independently conduct a project of their own choice. It is worth 60% of an A level, grade for grade, in terms of UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) points and, as a wholly coursework-based qualification, the EPQ provides a range of skills that students do not necessarily gain from A levels. Researching, referencing and composing a sophisticated piece of writing are the most useful of these, particularly for students going on to university. There are four types of EPQ projects through a dissertation, a report, an investigation or an artefact. Perhaps most importantly, it allows pupils to research something that interests them outside of their A level subjects.

I began my EPQ in the autumn term of 2018, my first in sixth form. I was told it would help my applications and prepare me for university, but more than that, the prospect of studying something outside my subjects was appealing. The summer of 2018 had been the hottest on record in Britain, and with it came an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2018) report detailing the importance of keeping the temperature rise down, describing the difference between a rise of 2 °C and 1.5 °C, and its catastrophic consequences. I became more aware of the world as I grew up and climate change seemed a threat that was impossible to ignore. And so I decided to base my EPQ around it, to develop a deeper understanding of our global response and the obstacles we face.

Initially, my title was: 'Is It Possible to Keep Global Temperature Rise "Well below 2° C"?'. However, I changed this halfway through the project, to focus on the political aspect of climate change. This decision was made with the help of my EPQ tutor. A tutor's job is to give feedback about progress, but not actually teach, and so the decision was made by thinking it through with my tutor, about whether the new title was achievable and in line with research I had already done. It was what interested me most about the research I'd conducted to that point; I noticed it was an area that presented many obstacles to taking action against climate change. The political systems of our current world often lead to little progress on climate policy, and the gains that are made are rarely enough.

Alongside changing the title of my project, I encountered obstacles along the way, which I had to adapt to. Researching took longer than I had anticipated, as the topics and books I was reading were complex and took time to properly understand. On top of that, writing the dissertation took planning time, writing time and time to edit, with the advice of my tutor. As I was also learning A level content at the same time, and revising for exams, the writing and editing of the dissertation took from July 2019 until February 2020. My EPQ focused on three levels of politics: international, national and local, including individuals' responses.

International and National Responses

At an international level, I researched global policy, such as international agreements. Primarily, this focus was on the Paris Agreement and the commitment to it from various countries. The Paris Agreement outlined the 'well below 2 °C' target, and while many signed, including the USA and China – a landmark feat – unfortunately few countries are on track to meet their side of the agreement (Climate Action Tracker, 2020). None of these are the biggest polluters or world leaders, such as the USA, China or many European states, including the United Kingdom. These top-polluting countries' efforts are limited and are not sufficient to fulfil the Paris Agreement's targets. There are many obstacles to meeting the targets, including national leadership, reliance on fossil fuels and a reluctance by many countries to forfeit fuels they saw as a

gateway to economic development. The Paris Agreement was enlightening as well, as it highlighted the importance of correcting historical disparities in emissions, as countries such as India were reluctant to sign without financial incentives, and the promise of green technology from those who have historically been the biggest polluters, such as the USA and United Kingdom.

Following this, I looked in more depth at two countries. First, I explored the USA for a number of reasons. In June 2017, it had pulled out of the Paris Agreement, under the newly elected president, Donald Trump. This mirrored a similar exit from a climate agreement by a Republican president, when George W. Bush pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol during his first term, after it had been signed by the Democrat president Bill Clinton. The USA is currently the world's superpower in a unipolar world and has huge influence over the rest of the world. The USA has a history of denying and being ineffective in the face of climate change. Leaders of the Environmental Protection Agency have often been appointed to appease certain industries, instead of prioritising the environment. As a country with vast supplies of natural resources, the USA relies heavily on industry and is still extracting huge amounts of oil and gas, with little thought to the environmental problems this poses.

Second, I looked at the United Kingdom. This was because I was interested in how my own country was combatting climate change, and whether we had been effective. In many ways, the United Kingdom has made some impressive changes. Looking at fossil fuel usage in electricity generation since 2008, when the United Kingdom was fuelled primarily by coal and gas, there has been a huge reduction in the use of coal and an increase in the use of solar and particularly wind power (Pearce, 2020). However, the use of gas is still bigger than any other type of fuel, and so undermines gains made in renewable energy. These changes, while impressive, are not enough to meet the Paris Agreement target. Britain has been held back in new climate policy due to the political turmoil and chaos of Brexit, leaving no room for discussions about climate policy. This lack of discussion may be exacerbated following the economic downturn caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Local and Individual Responses: taking action

Lastly, I researched local and individual responses to climate change, focusing on Leeds, which is not only where I live, but also a hub of climate change work, with an active Climate Commission with links to the university and businesses. In April 2019, following a series of youth strikes in the city, Leeds declared a climate emergency, and the council voted to sign up to a target of a no more than 1.5 °C rise. Leeds has taken action on this front, with initiatives such as the Clean Air Zone, which will tax those who drive through the city centre, including commuters, and encourage the use of public transport with a fine of up to £50.

One thing that affected Leeds' progression in climate action was the YouthStrike4Climate movement. While I was researching my EPQ, the

YouthStrike4Climate movement found momentum all over the world, including in Leeds. It seemed contradictory to be putting so much time into researching this topic and not attend the first protest I'd seen for climate change, particularly one directed at schoolchildren. I participated in many of the strikes, due to my own desire for change, which had been emphasised by the research I had done for my EPQ. There was discouragement from the school leadership to join in the strike, as it involved missing lessons. Despite this, the strike quickly became attended by thousands of people, including students from my school, with Leeds becoming the second-largest protest outside London. On top of this, by September, the strike had grown further, with members of the university's staff, as well as community groups, taking part.

Leeds is already a focal point for climate analysis, as home of the Priestley International Centre for Climate. The movement had local effects, with the City Council crediting the YouthStrike4Climate for their decision to declare a climate emergency, but in many ways it was unable to effect real national change, due mainly to the fact that most of the strikers were teenagers, but also due to political distractions such as Brexit. It also had effects at an individual level, making myself, and many other young people, more hopeful, as it was the first time we had seen change being caused by people demanding it. It also served to show the level of support climate action has around the country, with people willing to make changes to their lifestyle to help keep global warming below the safe threshold. However, it also showed the difficulty of creating real change, and the effort that will have to go into creating a climate-conscious world.

Finally, I looked at individuals' responses, and what holds us back from engaging more with climate change. I found that there are several reasons why humans are reluctant to face it. The psychologist Per Espen Stoknes (2017) described our feelings towards climate change as 'apocalypse fatigue', meaning that we feel paralysed by the thought of what is to come, leading to denial of the problem, convincing ourselves that it is not coming soon or will not affect us. The solution to this, he proposes, is to be more engaged with one another, expressing the feelings we have about climate change and encouraging each another. Focusing on the world we will create by removing fossil fuels and other harmful practices is useful, giving the world something appealing to run towards, rather than something to run away from. Of course, fear can encourage people to take to action, but too much does the opposite. Being open and engaged with one another is our best hope of combatting this.

Reflections

The outcome of my project was that it showed me how difficult radical political change is – but it also affirmed its necessity. In order to properly fight climate change, radical changes to the way our economy works must be made, to end our expansion into natural habitats, and the use of fossil fuels. However, these changes need not be a bad thing. In turning our backs on fossil fuels, there is a

chance for a fairer and greener world, especially if we treat this as a global problem, rather than a series of national problems.

However, there is no telling what COVID-19's impact will be on national and international politics, only that it will be significant. Some argue that it will lead to greater local engagement and a shift towards support for health services. Some argue that it will allow authoritarianism to flourish in some areas of the world. One thing is certain though, we cannot lose sight of trying to combat climate change in the long term.

The EPQ was useful in so many ways. Through investigating a real-world issue, it allowed me to engage better in my learning, as it was something I could see unfolding in current events, and therefore deepen my understanding of world events and the different roles in them. As part of the course, I had to present my finished research, which allowed me to show what I had learned, vocalise my views and really narrow down the key areas of my dissertation. Alongside this, it gave me skills which will be useful heading towards university, such as referencing, researching, organising time independently and reflecting on the process of learning. Writing an EPQ is something I would recommend to any sixth-form student.

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DAISY COLTMAN is 18 years old and a Year 13 student studying History, Geography and English Literature A levels. During her time in sixth form, she has participated in strikes organised by YouthStrike4Climate and seen the effects it is having on decision-making in her city and the world. In the autumn of 2020, she plans to go to university to study History, which is a key interest of hers. She loves learning about social change in the past, having enjoyed

being taught about the civil rights and suffragette movements at school, and hopes to continue this into her future studies. *Correspondence*: yr13dcoltman@roundhayschool.com