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Photograph by Emily Ankers

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

On behalf of the editorial team, I am delighted to welcome you to the 2025 issue of the Grand Union Magazine. This issue brings together the work of Grand Union scholars and alumni, offering a window into the diverse and meaningful research being conducted across disciplines, institutions, and geographies. The contributions featured here represent only a small part of the wide-ranging scholarship within our community, yet together they reflect the depth, care, and creativity that characterise the work of Grand Union researchers.

The central theme that arose from this year's submissions is research-as-journey – a non-linear process shaped by uncertainty, redirection, doubt and discovery.

In this issue, contributors reflect on their experiences – from identity shifts, methodological innovations, contextual challenges, and research outcomes. What emerges most clearly is that, despite their diversity, these topics are united by a shared thread: the resilience, patience, and commitment that each researcher brings to the unfolding journey of their work.

Methods in Motion highlights the methodological complexity at the heart of many research journeys. Faced with practical and conceptual challenges, contributors devised creative, flexible, and often innovative approaches to data collection. Their work reveals how research methods are not fixed tools, but evolving practices shaped by context, constraint, and the researcher's engagement in the field.

Research in Context explores how external forces—social, political, cultural, and environmental—shape the research journey. This section highlights how research is embedded in and influenced by the wider world, showing that academic inquiry is inseparable from the contexts it engages.

Research and the Self explores the intersection between. Contributors reflect on how personal experience and identity shape and are reshaped by their work, and on the emotional and intellectual transformations that occur throughout the research journey, demonstrating that research is as much about self-discovery and growth as it is about producing knowledge.

We are deeply grateful to all the contributors whose thoughtful and inspiring work is featured in these pages, as well as to the Grand Union DTP for its continued support. This magazine would not have been possible without the commitment of the dedication of the editorial team.

We hope you find this edition of the Grand Union Magazine to be engaging, reflective, and a meaningful insight into the diverse journeys of our research community.

Freya Cole Norton

Editor-in-Chief

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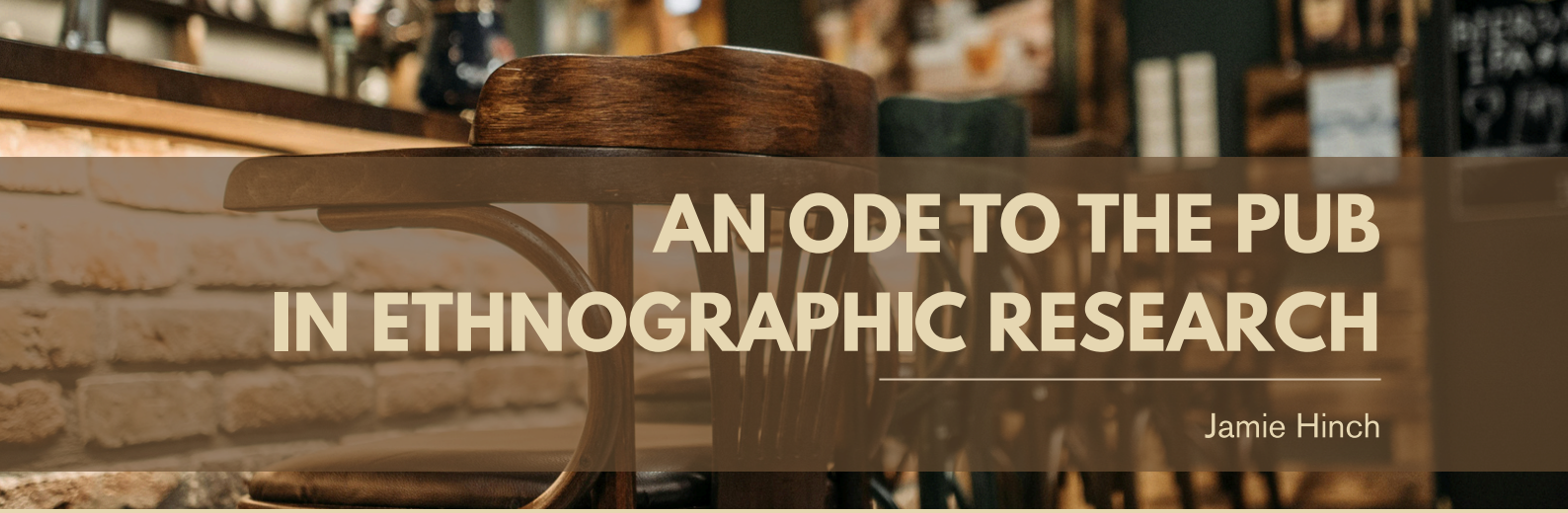


AN ODE TO THE PUB IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Jamie Hinch

Shivering a little, you close the car door behind you. It is only 19:25 but it has been dark for hours, and the fog which gripped the day shows no sign of relenting. This is not the Cornwall of the popular imagination: where are the golden beaches, glistening oceans, or quaint fishing villages? Not here. You are in the Clay Country village of St Dennis: the industrial heart of mid-Cornwall. If it were less foggy, your panorama would include quarries, pyramidal mounds, bleak moorland, and a vast incinerator- the only present suggestion of which is a red light piercing the fog at the top of its chimney. The red devil, so they say.

Traversing the gloom, you pass through a high wooden gate and go immediately down some steep concrete stairs. A security light hanging dingily above you reveals a heavy-set door; a crack of light escaping out from behind it. Not exactly welcoming, but do not turn around! Slipping inside, you see two further doors. Whilst tempting to enter the W/C door in front of you to reconsider your course of action, I do not recommend it. The light doesn't work. No, take the other door to your left.

A red carpet greets you (ignore its texture under-foot). Turn left again and head to the bar. You'll see Knocker at his usual table, and Jim leaning between the wall and bar. Along with several others, they give you terse nods: "alright pard". A statement not a question. Get yourself a drink- it's on me.

I firmly believe the Grand Union DTP should provide a drinks fund as part of its Research Training Support Grants (RTSGs). The (shockingly cheap) drinks here are a necessary prop to enter into some of the most engaging conversations you will have as part of your research.

Suspiciously, the bar worker gets you the pint you just ordered. Make your way over to the table next to Knocker's and cast your eyes between the pub and the football on the TV. Don't force conversation; wait for it to come to you. If nothing comes tonight don't worry. You'll be back. And back again.

I wish I had this guidance and assurance when I began my fieldwork. I would indeed return and return again, slowly becoming a regular of the Working Men's Club (the Club). Sure enough, people started talking to me. I was met with initial bemusement, invariably referred to as the "up-country fella who lives in the van"; a "foreigner" from "posh-land". My home-counties accent stands out as much as my British-Gas-blue van here.

The bemusement remained, but gradually, the terse nods were replaced with wry smiles: "back again, are we?", "come to learn more about the lithium?", "what's the latest with that lithium, anyway?".

Over the eight months I lived in St Dennis researching the 'contested clayscapes' of speculative lithium mining occurring in the village, the Club was invaluable. I met people who had lived in St Dennis all their lives; whose families had worked in mining for three generations; and who deeply cared about the heritage and landscape of the Clay Country. Equally valuably, I met recent arrivals who knew nothing of the region's mining history with not a care in the world for the impacts of potential lithium mining. I met everyone in between.

I did not always go to the Club. The nearby 'Commercial' is a smaller, stickier, more karaoke-machinier space. It too proved to be an ethnographic oasis. On St Piran's Day 2024, I found myself there joining in with the 'Trelawny Shout': 9pm had struck, and the Imerys Male Voice Choir along with the audience ended a rousing rendition of the Cornish anthem 'Trelawny' with cries of "KERNOW BYS BYKEN!" (Cornwall forever!). Conversations on Cornwall's mining history, 'emmets', and the mysterious granite batholith beneath us followed. I left that night enchanted and enraptured.

From midwinter to midsummer, from mundane evenings to St Piran's Day, I am incredibly indebted to the pubs of St Dennis.

It is often said that pubs are the hub of English (/Cornish) village life. They are the best place to meet people, on their terms. So, let me end this ode to the pub with a story typifying this: it was half-time during England's Euro 2024 match against Denmark. I had flocked with the rest of the pub to stand in the sunny smoking area, when a woman bee-lined over to me. Stubbing out her cigarette to better jab her fingers, she cried: "You're one of the lithium people!" and proceeded to accuse me of damaging the local landscape.

Thankfully, another regular stepped in to affirm my story of having nothing to do with its extraction, instead there just to understand people's perspectives. Mollified, she explained how much the surrounding landscape means to St Dennis. We ended the discussion just in time for the second half, with the other regular reaffirming: "Don't worry – he's one of us – just coming to the Club and speaking with us as normal people". I bought them both pints: I really do think it should be a part of the RTSG.

SWIMMING IN POLLUTED WATERS

EMBRACING DISCOMFORT IN THE FIELD

Hope Steadman

The roaring water gushed over my shoulders as I sat on the old rock weir. I closed my eyes, allowing it to wash over me. Goosebumps pricked my skin all too soon, and I jumped forward into the current, allowing the river to pull me forward. I turned onto my back as it slowed, floating blissfully under the summer sun. But the pleasure was fleeting, as out of the corner of my eye, I sensed something else.

A pool of white, milky fluid floated disturbingly close to my head, and I instinctively swam away, sniffing the air in alarm. From my research of river quality, I knew all too well that milky puddle could be sewage. Checking the online pollution map when I returned home, I found a sewage treatment works that discharged into the river just a short distance further upstream.

This wasn't just a recreational swim. As part of my DPhil research on digital river mediations in Oxfordshire, I had immersed myself in the River Thames. Joining wild swimmers in the river pushed me to better understand the sensory, embodied experience of cold water swimming, something I'd never tried before the research began. Chatting as we swam, heads bobbing above the water, my participants and I would talk of the mental buzz of cold water immersion, the pleasure of tingling, pink skin, or even the awkward art of getting dressed on the riverbank. And yet, the very thing that brought my participants so much joy is now inseparably linked with discomfort and disgust – with stories of floating particles, odd smells and funny tummies, and of planning and re-planning swims around the warnings and alerts from mobile apps and pollution maps.

The method was nothing if not challenging. Swimming whilst interviewing tested my ability to multi-task – focusing on my own safety, my participant's, my research questions, their responses, the feelings in my body, the signs of pollution around me – all whilst battling the brain freeze that came with the cold currents of the river.

The experience was not only physically but emotionally challenging, and when the time came to take a break from fieldwork, I felt guiltily relieved that I could avoid stories of environmental degradation for at least a few weeks.

And yet, the emotional complexity of the wild swimming experience is something this 'swim-along' method was immensely valuable in capturing. Not only allowing me to get to know my participants better, the method also helped capture the strange mix of pleasure and disgust many local swimmers experience in their rivers. The power of this methodology is in the visceral, embodied understanding it offers, improving my understanding of the local, tacit knowledges so important to navigating swimming risk.

The methodology has transformed how I understand swimmers' embodied relations with river quality, and the digital technologies they use to manage their own bodily exposure to microbial pollution. Whilst uncomfortable at times, the swims ultimately made the project more meaningful, rich and enjoyable than I could ever have anticipated.

REFLECTIONS ON USING POETRY FILM FOR DATA COLLECTION

Gemma Cook

My PhD aims to raise awareness and understanding about the policy realities of adults with cerebral palsy using art as method. A substantive component of data collection has been the co-creation of a poetry film with three adults with cerebral palsy, each with different perspectives. A poetry film is a short film that fuses spoken-word poetry, imagery, and sound.

The term cerebral palsy describes a broad range of motor impairments, with wide ranging functional presentations that are unique to the individual. This means that diversity is a defining feature of cerebral palsy, and using the medium of poetry film proved liberating to this context. Sarah Tremlett, a poetry filmmaker and mentor in the project, describes poetry film as having poly-expressiveness [1]. This poly-expressiveness allowed the creation of a polyphonic tension which was true to the cerebral palsy group reality. It also allowed for deconstruction to parts in order to understand a complex whole.

One of the co-creators summed up the engaging potential of this medium:

"People react to it better because it's interesting … it's not just the words when speaking, there is an animation in the background, there was the music … It was a sensory experience, you know if I start fantasizing for just a second. I think … that piece would be brilliant in, do you remember those IMAX theatre domes?" [laughing] - Co-Creator

Co-creators also commented on it being a fast-track to complex conversations with audiences, which added to the value of the research. They also recognised the dynamic nature of the poetry film; how they were seeing different meanings in it each time they viewed it, depending on company and context.

There were many elements to using poetry-film as data collection that were enjoyable. I enjoyed the creativity and got addicted to erasure animation, a 2D form of animation which involves drawing, erasing, and photographing images on paper over time. This has since become embedded into my art practice. One viewer appreciated the aesthetics:

"How beautifully explained something so difficult to portray … particularly to non-clinicians where it's really difficult to understand" - Audience Participant

The co-creators found the process difficult at times. Not only were they exploring deeply personal memories, but this was done together with two other different voices and my interpretation as an additional layer, in a process where we were required to reach consensus agreement across words, imagery, music and more. Despite inevitable tensions, ultimately, we all found making the film progressive and worthwhile:

"Being involved in the project has been cathartic and has allowed me to open about things that brought me unnecessary shame. I can now be the whole me with those I love" Co-creator

The co-creators were delighted with the final outcome and have shared it widely across social media platforms and as a provocation at several international cerebral palsy conferences.
The whole exercise demonstrated the value and enjoyment of researching through the poly-expressiveness of poetry film.

'Unchartered Togetherness', the poetry film, can be viewed at https://youtu.be/SPF5aYWQhRo.

[1] Tremlett, S. 2021 'The Poetics of Poetry Film', Bristol, Intellect Ltd

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE KIT BAG METHOD:

EXPLORING EMBODIED PRACTICE WITH FEMALE BOXERS

Elaine de Vos

My research examining the lived experiences of female boxers was originally envisioned to be a classic ethnography in which immersive techniques of protracted observations at field sites, participant interviews, and analysis of documentary sources and other artefacts would have been employed. This, however, was curtailed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed all training facilities where observations had been due to take place.

When the uncertainty about facilities reopening was extended by the UK Government indefinitely, the project team conducted a series of creative workshop sessions to explore ways in which the project could continue without the face-to-face immersive methods usually employed during traditional ethnographic research.

The initial experiments using the boxer's kit bag involved asking participants to share a photograph of their bag as an elicitation prompt during online interviews. The approach seemed promising, so a strategy developed to use the physical kit bag and enclosed kit to explore the entanglement between the material items of a participant's kit bag and their experiences of feeling and wearing their kit.

By asking participants to interact with the clothing and equipment contained within their kit bag, I intended to explore the sensory, embodied experiences that women boxers have with their kit and the role objects play in the negotiation of identity.

The kit bag method which developed examines situated and sensorial experiences of participants who engage in embodied activities, in this case, boxing.

It employs an elicitation approach centred upon the participant's' kit bag and its contents -- the clothing and other materials brought into a research setting – and how these are put on, used, stored, and made portable.

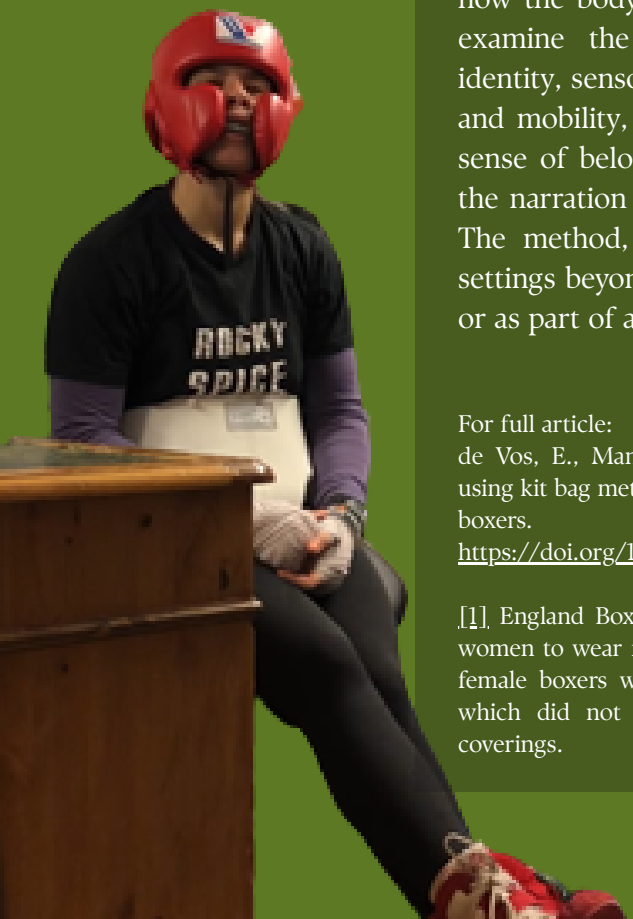
The participant performs their kitting-up process in dialogue with the researcher, while being filmed, and responding to researcher prompts, to detail their experiences and reflections of the process. Images and accounts of how the kit bag is stored, packed, and transported between key sites such as the home, work, gym, and competition space were also collected and analysed.

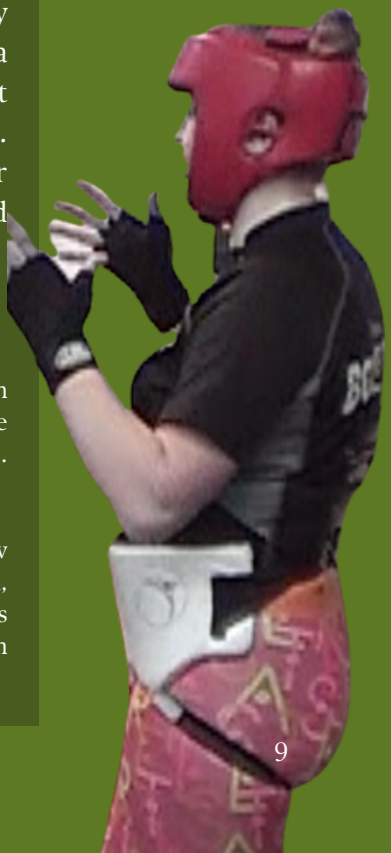
By discussing how the body acts and is acted upon when interacting with the boxing kit bag items, I consider the unspoken dimensions of their experiences as a boxer. The ethical, logistical, and practical constraints of recruiting participants remotely led us to focus upon a subset of participants from an earlier phase of the project. COVID-19 restrictions had relaxed by the time the method had been fully developed and ethical approval had been received, but as I did not want to disregard what I believed could be a valuable method, I continued with the approach, but with the immersive encounters with the kit bags taking place primarily in the boxer's usual training facility as this would enhance the contextual aspects of 'kitting-up'.

In practice, eight women between the ages of 17 and 49 participated in the immersive kit bag study, all in person. These eight encounters were conducted between September and November 2021. The total recorded data was 537 minutes with the average length of encounter being 67 minutes. All but one took place in a boxing gym, with the remaining encounter conducted in the participant's home at their request. Two were recreational boxers, three competed at national level, and two have competed internationally for England, with one winning several national titles. One participant was prevented from competing due to religious and cultural dress limitations.[1]. Three of the participants were from London, and the remainder were from across the Midlands region of the UK.

All participants were from different boxing clubs, and all trained in mixed gender environments. Four were also qualified England Boxing coaches. Having participants with a diverse range of involvement in the sport helped to identify whether the meanings attached to kit are common across all levels or if they are distinct to either levels of involvement or particular individuals.

By observing participants interacting with their boxing kit and encouraging reflective attention to how the body responds to each item, I was able to examine the relationships between objects and identity, sensory experiences, framings of portability and mobility, and how objects can both promote a sense of belonging in the boxing gym and support the narration of transitions in and out of character. The method, I argue, can be employed in other settings beyond boxing, and as a standalone method or as part of a larger ethnographic project.





For full article:
de Vos, E., Mansfield, L., & Stephens, N. (2024). Elicitation using kit bag methods: Exploring embodied practice with female boxers. Qualitative Research, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941241288203

[1] England Boxing changed the dress code in 2020 to allow women to wear full skin covering including a Hijab. Until then, female boxers were bound by the same dress code as males which did not allow for shorts beyond the knee, or arm coverings.

THE SILENCED VOICES OF NEVADA'S IMPRISONED WOMEN

Heidi McCafferty

In 2020, I took on the case of an individual in Nevada who had been given a 100-year sentence for his involvement in an accident as a teenager. In 2022, it reached the Nevada Supreme Court and led to his release (83 years early).

My passion for the law had led me to study an MSc in the School of Law at Birkbeck (2020-2022), University of London, where my dissertation focused on the impact the pandemic had on the mental and physical wellbeing of men and women incarcerated in Nevada.

Using the correspondence method (letter writing), I gathered and analysed swathes of data from across facilities in the state, revealing important findings. The 'handling' of the pandemic by the Nevada Department of Corrections (NDOC) essentially consisted of lockdowns which stretched on for months, along with a state-wide halt to in-person visitation. Men held by NDOC were let out of their cells once every three days for 20 minutes. Violence escalated and mental health plummeted. During a time of immense anxiety for the research participants, many highlighted the relief that letter writing gave them.

When other communication channels to the outside world were restricted or removed, writing became one of the only ways they could feel heard. I concluded that the correspondence method offers criminologists a powerful route to gathering rich data in highly restricted and often overlooked spaces and I believe that it is currently under-utilised by the academic community.

Nevada incarcerates women (within its jails and prisons) at a rate of 175 per 100,000 residents, which according to the Prison Policy Initiative, 'is a rate higher than any other democratic country on earth'. Right now, the Nevada Department of Corrections houses close to 1,000 women across two sites, Florence McClure Correctional Center and Jean Conservation Camp, both based in Clark County. Through my literature review, it became apparent that the experiences of these women have been almost entirely overlooked by the academic community. Very little is known about them, other than the occasional article published in the press about their cases.

Through voluntary work with an incredible non-profit organisation in the state, Return Strong, I delved deeper. When working with these women, it became clear to me that there was a key theme that ran throughout their experiences: intimate partner violence (IPV). Many of the women I engaged with were in prison as a direct result of the abuse they had endured. The Vera Institute reports that since 1980, the number of women in prison in Nevada has increased by 1,166%. Alarming findings by SafeNest, released in the last few weeks, reveal that Nevada has the second highest domestic abuse rate in the USA.

My research aims to identify a correlation between these statistics and gain a deeper understanding of the role intimate partner violence plays in the legal journeys of women incarcerated in the state. I plan for my findings to help organisations lobby for change in policy and sentencing practices which fail to adequately consider a woman's experience of IPV. I also plan to make recommendations for interventions which could help reduce the numbers of women being directed to prison, plans which would also be applicable to other states in the USA.

Since beginning my PhD in October 2024, I have been able to connect with a team who are assisting me with this work, including a fellow PhD student at the University of Michigan who has ten years of lived experience at Florence McClure Correctional Center. Once again, I am working with Return Strong, who are assisting me with the data collection. As soon as my ethics application and data management plan have been approved, I will be distributing a survey to 150 incarcerated women in June 2025. I then plan to select 30 research participants who will work closely with me for 12 months, using the correspondence method, to share their own experiences and shed light on their journeys. The safety and wellbeing of the research participants I am working with is my main priority, and I am immensely grateful to the Grand Union Doctoral Training Partnership for the excellent training opportunities made available to me in this area.

I look forward to sharing my preliminary findings next year.

HIGH STAKES AND HOLLOW PROMISES:

INDONESIA'S CONTROVERSIAL WAR ON DRUGS

Lucrezia Rizzelli

Indonesia's war on drugs has been framed by the state as a moral imperative: a strategy to save the nation's youth from foreign corruption and societal decay. In this context, my doctoral research examined a simple but crucial question: why do drug offenders in Indonesia still choose to commit these offences despite the extreme punitiveness of the system?

Indonesia imposes some of the harshest penalties for drug crimes in the world, including life imprisonment and capital punishment. As of 2023, 94% of all new death sentences in the country were for drug offences. This severity is part of a broader narrative that depicts drugs as a national emergency. However, despite the ever-increasing harshness of sanctions, drug offending continues to rise, prisons are overcrowded, and public resources remain tied up in a failing punitive apparatus.

My doctoral research, which the Death Penalty Research Unit (DPRU) at the University of Oxford's Centre for Criminology conducted in partnership with the Death Penalty Project and Atma Jaya University, investigated the decision-making processes of those convicted for drug offences in Indonesia through a mixed-method approach based on semi-structured interviews with incarcerated offenders. Most participants demonstrated a high awareness of the risks involved, including knowledge of the law and the possibility of severe punishment, but still chose to offend. This finding starkly challenges the core assumptions underpinning Indonesia's policy: namely, that increased punishment leads to decreased offending through rational deterrence.

The reasons behind this apparent contradiction are complex. For many offenders, the calculus was not one of risk and reward, but of necessity, fatalism and limited alternatives. Personal circumstances such as poverty, unemployment, health issues and familial pressures emerged as powerful motivators.

The presence of informal networks built on trust, reciprocity and shared hardship, also often facilitated involvement in the drug trade more than any deliberate criminal intent. Moreover, the corrupt and arbitrary nature of the criminal justice system diluted the interviewees' abilities to accurately assess their risk of arrest, conviction and incarceration.

Perhaps most disturbingly, the research exposed routine violations of due process and systemic abuse by law enforcement. Several interviewees recounted experiences of arbitrary arrest, torture, and coerced confessions. These are not isolated incidents, but part of a broader pattern of state violence, which current research projects conducted by the DPRU on death rows across Indonesia have also unearthed.

Indonesia's drug policies are not merely ineffective, but downright counterproductive and ethically troubling. The state's choice to treat low-level offenders and users as threats to national security has entrenched social inequalities, particularly affecting the poor and marginalised. Moreover, the introduction of the new Criminal Code, which retains the death penalty in a 'probationary' manner, risks further normalising this punitive stance under a progressive veneer.

In short, Indonesia's war on drugs has failed, both in reducing crime and in upholding human dignity. We must move beyond the hollow promise of punitiveness and towards evidence-based, humane policies rooted in public health, harm reduction, and social justice. Only then can we begin to address the real factors underpinning drug offending in Indonesia.

CRIMINALISING ECOCIDE IN THE UK:

AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

Jodie Bettis

What began as a PhD research topic suddenly became practice when I was invited to help draft the UK's first ecocide law in just 10 days.

A Window of Opportunity

In November 2023, crossbench peer and nature advocate, Baroness Rosie Boycott, unexpectedly won a spot in the House of Lords' private members' ballot — a rare chance to introduce a new piece of legislation.

She chose ecocide. With little time and even less precedent, the Secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Nature and Climate – or Peers for the Planet - was tasked with drafting her a bill and I received an urgent request for assistance via Jojo Mehta, CEO at Stop Ecocide International.

Ten Days to Write a Crime

The timeline was incredibly tight: ten days to submit a draft to the Bill Office. With a blank page, zero funding, and limited time, we enlisted Professors Damien Short and David Whyte — experts in ecocide, environmental justice, and state-corporate crime.

Defining ecocide was our starting point. Ecocide, as defined by the late Polly Higgins (1968-2019) is not just environmental damage. It's 'the extensive damage to, destruction of, or loss of ecosystems to the extent that peaceful enjoyment by inhabitants is severely diminished'.

More recently, a panel of international human rights lawyers proposed that "unlawful or wanton acts, committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment" should constitute the crime of ecocide. Embedding this into UK criminal law proved complex.

Translating Vision into Law

The bill had to walk a tightrope between legal realism and ecological vision. Higgins had imagined a world where the law defends the rights of nature. But the UK legal system, with its deep common law traditions and cautious approach to criminalisation, demands legal clarity and enforceable mechanisms.

We considered how to define victimhood and what level of harm should trigger criminal liability. We also examined whether a strict liability approach was viable and if those in authority should be held responsible for harm caused by others. Comparative insights from France and Belgium — both vanguards in European ecocide legislation — were helpful but not directly transferable.

Legal Tensions and Practical Compromises

The hardest decisions to make were doctrinal. Could we assign criminal liability for failing to prevent harm to an ecosystem? Would courts accept strict liability? How do you prove intent when the perpetrator is a company or the victim is not a person, but a peat bog or a river system?

These tensions exposed broader political questions: is the UK ready to prosecute corporate actors for ecological harm? How would enforcement work without environmental regulators being given more powers — or more funding? What we came up sought to open up these debates and ask lawmakers to consider an alternative way to protect Britain's ecosystems.

A Scaffold, Not a Solution

The bill, as it stands – or rather as it fell, given the process was curtailed with the change in Government – is only a starting point. Our draft remains imperfect, partial, and unlikely to pass in its current form, yet it creates space for a broader conversation about responsibility, harm, and environmental governance.

A Collective Effort in a Constrained Space

Bills are never the product of a single author; our Ecocide Bill was a team effort — collaborative, interdisciplinary, and deeply compressed. Most of the process takes place in elite and highly reactive institutional spaces, often with little time to meaningfully include voices of those most affected by environmental degradation.

A member of the drafting team I later interviewed for my PhD project described the process as "monumentally challenging." A parliamentarian admitted to me they Googled ecocide whilst in the Chamber to check if it applied to the debate they were listening to. That says a lot about how new — and fast moving — this legal frontier is.

Reflecting on Lawmaking as Critical Practice

As a critical legal geographer, I'm interested in how law interacts with the land and seascapes it seeks to govern. This experience has enriched my PhD research. It taught me that drafting ecocide law is not just a technical task, but a political and moral one too. It made visible the institutional frictions between ecological justice and legal form.

For me, this wasn't just law-in-the-making. It was law as practice, as compromise, and — above all — as possibility.

PISTACHIO PRODUCERS IN CENTRAL IRAN

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND FARMERS' RESILIENCE

Zohreh Moghfeli

In Central Iran, pistachio farming and production is more than a livelihood. It is deeply connected to the economy, identity, social structure, and culture of the region. Many residents of this area, even those employed in different industries and services, still own pistachio gardens inherited from their previous generations. These gardens are not only sources of income but provide a sense of belonging for the residents and reflect a long history of agricultural tradition.

Having hot and dry climate, however, this region is one of the most climate vulnerable areas in the country. Recently, thus, pistachio producers have faced several risks, especially water scarcity and market instability. Water issues have been worsened by drought, overuse of groundwater, changes in rainfall patterns in this region, periodic heat waves, increased annual temperature, and water management in this area. These challenges are accompanied by problems related to infrastructure, organizational and institutional policies.

Being born and raised in this area, I have always been familiar with pistachio and its production. Also, based on my previous work analysing pistachio farmers' social network in villages, I saw the need to provide a detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis of the relationships between pistachio farmers and local agricultural organisations.

I wanted to understand how these relationships help farmers improve their resilience to the challenges and risks they face. These relationships include exchanges of knowledge and information, financial assistance, provision of infrastructure and equipment, and access to insurance and supportive policies—all of which contribute to strengthening farmers' resilience and production.

To do this and in my PhD, I am using Social Network Analysis (SNA), which is a useful tool for studying networks of farmers and agricultural organisations and to investigate how these networks affect climate change resilience in these societies. SNA involves collecting data on who connects with whom and what kinds of relationships flows between them. It also creates visual maps showing these connections, which help to analyse the quality and quantity of interactions between different actors, which could be people, organizations, and other groups.

Through this method, I can investigate different aspects like the level of cohesion, mutual interactions, support, and collaboration in the farming societies. This helps to understand how these dynamics affect the resilience and adaptation of farmers and organisations to various shocks and risks.

This study shows the importance of looking not just at the existence of social networks, but also their structure, strength, and how well they function. Understanding how farmers interact with a range of actors, from peers to institutions, reveals patterns of support and knowledge exchange that are critical for climate resilience.

Going forward, I hope this research will contribute to a better understanding of how social relationships shape the way farmers respond to different risks, in similar farming contexts. By focusing on the links between farmers and the institutions around them, this study offers insights into how support is accessed, how knowledge and information is shared, or sometimes limited.

The findings can also be useful not only for local and regional planning, but also for informing broader agricultural and environmental policies that aim to support resilience in rural communities.

By understanding these social dynamics, more practical and realistic strategies could be developed, and I hope the research draws more attention to the role of community and social networks in agriculture and how they support efforts to make farming systems more resilient to the impacts of climate change

There's a dark patch on the tatami mat. The woven rushes worn down, slightly sunken, bits of newspaper stuck to it. "Lonely death," says the real estate agent. This house can't be sold. The lonely death, along with the threatening cracks in the walls, have made it unsafe. It will have to be demolished.

First though, the empty house must be cleared.

A Buddhist monk has already removed the ancestors from the butsudan, the wooden cabinet that once held their spirits. It will now be sold to China, where it will become a vanity box.

The dolls, effigies of people in Japanese belief, will be taken to a Shinto temple to be ritually disposed of.

CARE AND COMMUNITIES

THE IMPORTANCE OF AFFECTIVE COMMUNITIES FOR WOMEN GARMET WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES IN BANGLADESH

Gulfam Tasnim

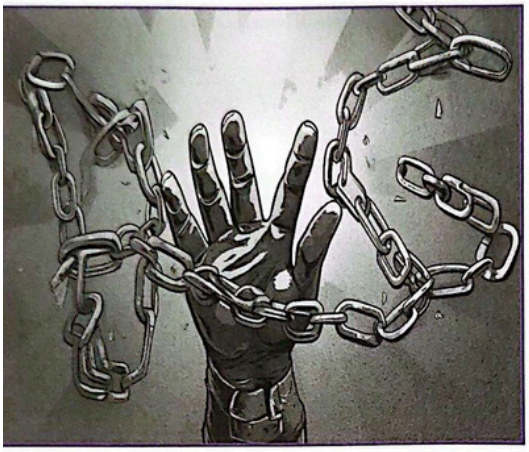
My doctoral project explores the significance of care and communities for garment working mothers and their families in Bangladesh. I specifically explore an initiative in Dhaka which provides women garment workers with access to rights-based support and childcare facilities. The initiative is led by Textile Reuse and International Development (TRAID), a UK charity in partnership with Nagorik Uddyog (NU), an NGO in Bangladesh.

The activities under the initiative take place at four childcare centres. Social workers and teachers provide care and education to children of garment workers at these centres. Staff at the centres also organize peer-group meetings for children and garment working parents. In these meetings parents and children discuss and learn about gender equality, labour rights, mental health, reproductive health, hygiene and nutrition from social workers and peers.

The initiative emerged as a response to limited childcare facilities available for garment working mothers. Most women who work in Dhaka-based garment factories have no support from their families. This is because they migrate to Dhaka for work, leaving families behind in their home villages. Mothers who migrate with their children leave their children unattended or under inadequate supervision whilst they engage in long hours of factory work.

In such cases children are exposed to risks such as human trafficking and drug abuse. If garment working mothers cannot engage in long hours of factory work due to their care responsibilities, then they risk losing their job (Anwary, 2017). Therefore, women garment workers face an immense socio-economic cost due to lack of childcare facilities, they either risk losing their job or their child/children.

মানসিক স্বাস্থ্য :
মানসিক স্বাস্থ্যের যত্ন,
আপনাকে একটি পরিপূর্ণ
ও কর্মক্ষম জীবন-যাপন
করার সক্ষমতা অর্জন
করতে সহায়তা করে।



কুসংস্কার মুক্ত থাকুন:
প্রকৃত শিক্ষা যেখানে
শুরু হয়, কুসংস্কার
সেখানে শেষ হয়।

Illustrations and messages by Nagorik Uddyog depicting the work it does to spread awareness. Image 1 highlights the importance of mental health awareness and Image 2 outlines how superstitions can be countered through education.

Bangladesh Labour Law stipulates that establishments having more than 40 women workers must provide and maintain proper childcare facilities for children under six years of age (Awaj Foundation, 2019; Kanya 2021). Despite this most factories cut costs by not investing in crèches (Awaj Foundation, 2019).

The government runs low-cost childcare centres but the services and infrastructure at these centres are poor (Kanya 2021). Garment working mothers have to rely on NGOs for childcare provision, however these NGOs have limited capacity due to funding constraints. The initiative I am studying is one such NGO-led initiative. It has the capacity to shelter 200 children.

The affective ecology that the initiative fosters give garment working mothers the option of providing for themselves and their families and improves the lives of their children. In addition, the initiative encourages open discussions among garment working parents and children on social issues such as child marriage, menstrual hygiene and contraception.

Such conversations are crucially important for women as patriarchal norms in Bangladesh suppress discussions on these issues. Adults who formerly attended the sessions (as children) pass on the knowledge that they gain at the sessions to their children. My research reveals this intergenerational impact of the initiative on the lives of garment working mothers and their children.

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FROM DYSTOPIA TO UTOPIA? RESEARCHING IN THE SHADOW OF MEXICO CITY'S WATER CRISIS

Grace Wright-Arora

Mexico City is currently and historically infamous for its water issues. It's a city that spatially and hydraulically lives in the shadow of colonial history – built in accordance with sacred Aztec cosmology, in a network of canals not unlike Venice, through the industrialising and colonising periods the originally copious amount of water the city had access to was drained. Now, water is brought in through old and leaky pipe infrastructure from aquifers hundreds of miles away. News headlines both nationally and internationally write of the impeding "day zero" – the dystopian day where the city of 22-million people will entirely run out of running water. This is edging ever closer, capturing the fear and imagination of politicians, journalists and citizens.

I'm currently in Mexico City researching how global financial dynamics affect how solutions to the water crisis are approached and managed. I am particularly interested in how water scarcity is increasingly being turned into an investible economic asset; presented as an opportunity for venture capitalists and global/local investors to make money whilst solving the water crisis. In economic geography, this is called the financialisation of water scarcity. I want to understand more about not just how these new climate finance dynamics play out – for example in terms of new public-private water partnerships, funds, and fuelling unequal economic growth between the global north and south – but also what the local impacts of these projects are.

Sometimes when we think about climate finance, or adaptation and mitigation, our ideas of these projects stay in the abstract and theoretical realm. Ideas like "green capitalism" – making money while saving the planet – are sometimes tricky to evaluate as they seem ideological rather than grounded in lived experiences. Through this research, I'm hoping to highlight one case study of how green capitalism plays out on the ground. What are the impacts of these new water financing projects on local communities – and particularly women – most affected by water scarcity in Mexico City? Are the projects that new water funds invest in those that actually help to alleviate water scarcity for those who bear the brunt of it the most? Or is this a perpetuation of prioritising capital gains over equitable water provisioning? Water is enshrined in the Mexico City constitution as a human right – but how to make this a reality remains unclear.

To bring things back to a more experiential level, more marginalized zones of Mexico City often only have running water for a few hours a day – or less. Some people go weeks with no water. Water provisioning is run by a municipal area – with such a big population, there must be some decentralisation to govern decision-making processes. Yet this makes governance opaque, financial decisions at the mercy of the ruling mayor of the city sub-region, and fundamentally always entwined with corruption, bureaucracy, ideology, and political willpower.

Investigating such a deeply complex issue as an outsider is a minefield that poses big challenges – not least because at points, sensitive information from both political and personal perspectives has been shared with me. I am constantly weighing up protecting participants' safety, protecting my own safety, and sharing knowledge that could perhaps make some small contribution to understanding how water scarcity has become quite so severe in a city where it actually rains not infrequently and there is a wealth of money and expertise constantly being pumped into solutions.

It's a pertinent moment to be researching water in Mexico City in 2025. Not just because the crisis is worsening; it rains less due to climate change, water inequality is becoming more polarised in terms of class, race, and gender, and gentrification across the city is exacerbating these dynamics – but also because Mexico City has now been run for the last six years by mayors from MORENA. This is a left wing, nationalist party that is hugely popular across both the city and the nation. Mexico City's current mayor, for example, Clara Brugada, was formerly the mayor of Iztapalapa – a vast 5-million-person borough in the south of the city, renowned for being ignored by the government and consequently having extremely high rates of poverty and crime.

But Clara has, in many significant ways, turned Iztapalapa around. She started investing heavily into the neighbourhood, improving water provisioning through expanded infrastructure and better local governance, though the gains remain uneven, overseeing some rainwater catchment systems to increase hydraulic self-sufficiency, and setting up "utopias"; social infrastructure for residents including free or highly subsidised swimming pools, dance classes, talks, and other activities that many had never had access to previously.

In some ways, it feels reminiscent of 1940s Britain, when public funding under the Attlee government prioritised libraries, pools, and social welfare.

However, the story is not a simple one of dystopia to utopia. Not by any means. Water scarcity remains rife, women continue bearing a disproportionate burden of this insecurity, and people in wealthier areas continue using highly subsidised water to wash 3 cars per day and water their golf courses. Social movements surrounding the right to water are abundant. The most popular solutions across the city are nature-based solutions that improve groundwater retention, infrastructural construction and repair, and rainwater catchment systems.

Yet despite local and international multi-scalar collaboration across governments, NGOs, and private partners, millions of people in the city do not know if they will get water when they turn their tap on every day. There is a lot more to this narrative than meets the eye – and behind the scenes, the water crisis is much more international and political than mainstream narrative suggestions that the crisis is caused by insufficient, leaky infrastructure and misallocation of funds. It's this backstory that I am doing my best to uncover, to understand what flows of power and money are being wielded, holding back the fight for just water provisioning and access across the city.

FROM VILLAGE HALLS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: A JOURNEY THROUGH RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN IRELAND

Conor Judge

In 2018, fresh from my undergraduate studies and a fast-paced internship in Dublin's Docklands, I found myself in a village of just 812 people in rural Ireland. I had accepted a role as a Rural Development Officer, tasked with supporting local communities to access domestic and EU funds for projects they designed and led. I knew no one, had no practical experience in community development, and had transitioned from a world of glass buildings and busy city streets to one of community halls and kitchen-table meetings. It was, in every sense, a baptism of fire.

For nearly two years, I worked side by side with these communities, helping them secure funding through the LEADER programme—an EU initiative that places local people at the heart of local development. I came to deeply admire the programme's bottom-up ethos, but the academic in me couldn't help noticing a glaring gap: there was remarkably little data on where these projects had taken place, what they focused on, or how much had been invested over time.

Years later, as part of my DPhil research, I returned to that very question. In early 2023, just as Ireland was preparing its next national rural development programme under the EU Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan 2023–2027, the LEADER programme was also undergoing a competitive re-tendering process. Local development companies and local governments were invited to submit new Local Development Strategies, building on past results and outlining future priorities.

Seizing the moment, I developed a methodology to geospatially map over 16,000 LEADER-funded projects—covering €900 million in funding over 15 years—for the first time at a national scale.

Drawing from basic public data, I was able to allocate these investments to the correct administrative boundaries and link them to socio-economic indicators from census and other administrative datasets. The goal was not only to visualise past investments, but to support deeper evaluation and strategic planning. But I faced a new challenge: how does one transform academic research into something genuinely useful for those working on the ground?

I prepared a short briefing document—just one page, with maps and graphs—and shared it with the Irish Local Development Network, the national body representing LEADER implementers. With their help, I hosted two short Zoom calls open to any interested development companies. I had no idea what to expect.

To my surprise and relief, the response was overwhelming. Several CEOs of Local Development Companies attended the presentations, and soon, I was fielding more requests than I had ever anticipated. I ultimately collaborated with nine companies, contributing 13 data chapters covering about 30% of Ireland's landmass.

For many, it was the first time since their establishment in the early 1990s that they could see, in concrete visual terms, the geography and scale of rural investment in their area.

It was humbling. Presenting data to professionals who live and work in these communities and some of whom had been doing this since before I was even born carries a certain vulnerability—after all, they know their areas far better than any dataset ever could. But thankfully, my approach was met with trust and appreciation.

The feedback helped sharpen my analysis and reaffirmed the value of data that is both rigorous and grounded in local knowledge.

This work also caught the attention of the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) and LEADER France, who invited me to present at the European LEADER Congress in the European Parliament in December 2023, kindly supported by the ESRC. There, I had the opportunity to share insights not just from Ireland, but from a broader inquiry into how evaluation processes at the EU level could be enhanced through better data and more inclusive methodologies—an area that now forms a core focus of my PhD.

The LEADER programme's central principle is deceptively simple: that local people are best placed to know what their communities need. Reflecting on this journey—from a remote village of 800 to the corridors of Brussels—it has been an honour to pursue research that holds true to that principle.

What began as quiet work on winter nights in rural Ireland has grown into a project that seeks to illuminate the impact of LEADER and help secure its legacy for years to come.

Sam Day

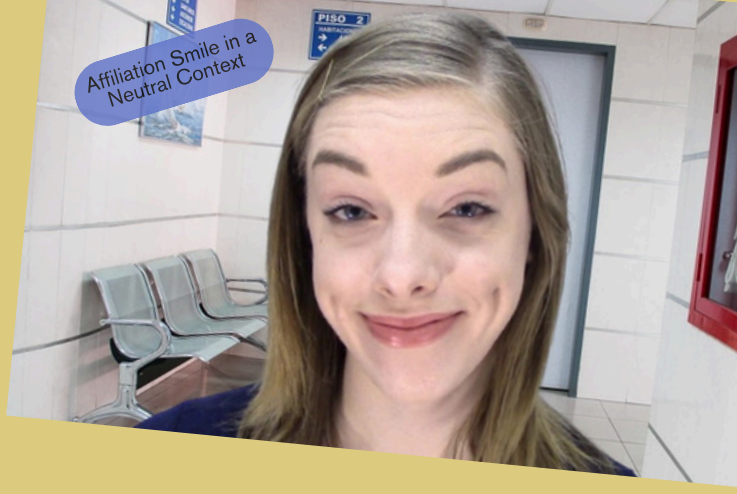
Humans are a social species, and we spend a large amount of our time interacting with other people. Given the frequency of social interaction, it is perhaps unsurprising that we are generally highly proficient at conversing and communicating with others. Although no two instances of social interaction are ever the same, we typically navigate these situations without much cognitive difficulty by deploying an appropriate combination of verbal and nonverbal behaviours. Nonetheless, this proficiency masks the fact that social interaction is an extremely complex activity which requires us to integrate multiple ambiguous and highly variable cues to decipher and respond to the feelings and intentions of others.

Perhaps the most informative and frequently utilised nonverbal social cues are derived from faces. Humans process faces in a specialised manner in comparison to other objects, as illustrated by the robust "face inversion effect" and a clear attentional bias towards the face. While static features of the face are often used to make personality judgements (e.g. trustworthiness), facial expressions are even more prominent social cues, because they communicate information about the expresser's intentions quickly and efficiently, as they change across time.

Of all the facial expressions, smiles are the most important and ubiquitous. Smiles are especially effective at catching the attention of observers and they tend to activate reward areas of the brain. Importantly for my thesis, they also have strong effects on the behaviour of perceivers.

For example, previous research has shown that smiles have considerable influence over both (1) low-level decisions such as how much to tip a waitress in a cocktail bar, and (2) high-consequence decisions such as voting preference and criminal sentencing severity.

This idea that smiles influence the subsequent behaviours of others underlies the theoretical framework that motivated my DPhil. Specifically, I adhered to the view that facial expressions are tools for social influence rather than reflective of an internal emotional state per se. This confers the adaptive advantage of being able to manipulate the behaviours of others to meet one's own social goals. This functionalist approach manifested itself in the types of smiles I studied throughout my DPhil.



Rather than conceiving of smiles as either "genuine" or "fake" as most past researchers have done, I used a model which divides smiles into three categories, each serving a different basic human social need. Specifically, (1) "reward smiles" reinforce the behaviours of others by inducing happiness in the perceiver, (2) "affiliation smiles" help to form and maintain social bonds by communicating reassurance or openness to interaction, whereas (3) "dominance smiles" are used to communicate superiority over the perceiver. Each is associated with different patterns of face muscle activation. Therefore, these smiles are visually distinct.

Given their importance to social interactions, many past researchers have explored the social effects of different smiles. Nonetheless, much of this work was limited by failing to include any accompanying context. During everyday interactions, faces are always encountered within a broader context, including situational, vocal, bodily, and dispositional information. Well-established principles of perception suggest that top-down contextual variables are likely to influence how facial expressions are perceived and evaluated.

Consequently, to improve our understanding of how responses towards these different smiles are influenced by the context they are seen within, I conducted a novel series of studies throughout my DPhil. Within each study, I combined smiles with situations to create smile-in-context stimuli. I then measured:

1. Ratings of the smiles along a series of scales (e.g. joyfulness, politeness, condescension)
2. Attention allocation as participants viewed the stimuli (using eye tracking technology)
3. The speed of approach and avoidance responses towards the stimuli
4. Mimicry of the smiles

The final study of my thesis was conducted at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, as part of a research visit funded by the ESRC's Overseas Institutional Visit (OIV) scheme. Working with the lab of Professor Ursula Hess, I immersed participants into either pleasant (a park) or unpleasant (a construction site) virtual environments, where they encountered virtual avatars who displayed different smiles.

Importantly, the virtual reality (VR) headset contained electrodes which allowed me to measure the activity of various muscles within the face, using electromyography (EMG). Hence, I was able to determine that the more pro-social smiles were mimicked to a greater extent than the more anti-social smiles. Moreover, mimicry was also influenced by context, such that all smiles were mimicked more in positive virtual environments than negative ones.

These findings complemented those of my previous studies. Overall, my thesis shows that situational context and smiles are reciprocally related, with the potential to influence the interpretation of one another. Moreover, context influences smile processing at both an early unconscious stage and a later conscious stage. However, the extent of its influence depends upon the relative ambiguity of both the face and the situation.

WHAT A DIFFERENCE FOUR YEARS MAKES IN AI

Hannah Kirk

When I began my DPhil research in 2020, the most popular AI language model (GPT-2) had been downloaded less than half a million times, an academic curiosity used by a niche community of researchers and developers. Today, ChatGPT has over 400 million monthly active users around the globe. In four short years, AI language models have transformed into technologies that shape how hundreds of millions of people work, create, and communicate daily.

What began as abstract inquiries into the alignment between AI systems and human values evolved at a breakneck speed into urgent matters affecting society at large. It hasn't always been easy to work at this pace of change. A back-of-the-envelope calculation using Stanford's 2025 AI Index suggests there have been 110,000 new AI-related publications since I began my DPhil. Even with all-nighters, no student can grapple with this sort of scale. The field moves forward relentlessly, whether researchers are ready or not.

In this article, I walk through my research journey as a DPhil student trying to make her own mark on a world as it is being transformed by AI.

Challenging Fundamental Assumptions

My PhD focuses on AI alignment—ensuring that AI systems act in accordance with human values and preferences—a field that began as primarily the purview of computer scientists and AI safety researchers. In the first year of my DPhil, a technique called "Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback" (RLHF) emerged as the dominant paradigm for aligning AI systems. RLHF works by having human evaluators rate or rank AI outputs, with these preferences then used to train the AI system to produce more desirable responses. Despite humans being central to this process, the human side of the alignment equation was paradoxically absent, reduced to simplistic abstractions. In other safety-critical fields like aviation, workplace safety, and cybersecurity it's widely accepted that human factors are central to system safety. Yet in AI alignment, humans remained a black box.

Taking Stock of a Rapidly Expanding Field

My first DPhil chapter[1] surveyed 95 papers to document human feedback in AI language models. This systematic review revealed concerning patterns: small, homogeneous groups of human raters provided the lion's share of the feedback data, preferences were frequently treated as universal, and the processes for defining values were rarely transparent.

Building on this foundation, my second chapter[2] drew from post-structuralist political theory to argue that "alignment" functions as an "empty signifier"—a term that gains power precisely because of its ambiguity. I proposed a framework for making transparent the implicit choices in operationalising alignment: namely, the AI behaviours deemed to be necessary for a system to be "aligned", how meanings are assigned to these dimensions and by whom.

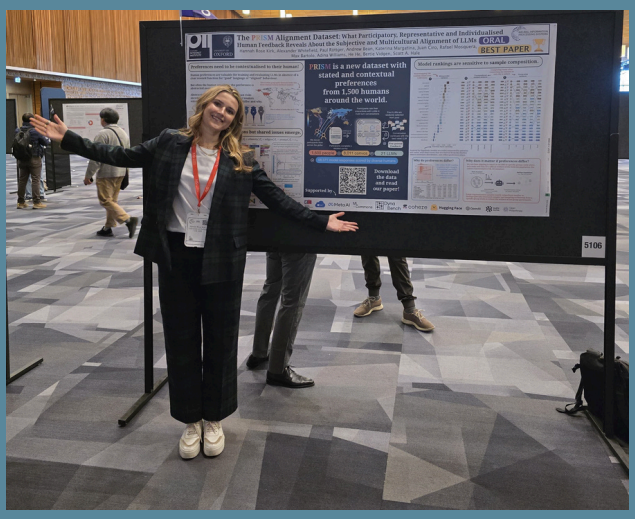
From Critique to New Foundations

Providing critiques without solutions often leads research to an impasse. So, I committed the rest of my DPhil to filling empirical gaps in our understanding of human-AI interaction, developing new datasets and experimental methodologies to update the field's assumptions.

Broadly, two classes of simplifying assumptions pervade alignment research. First, that human preferences are universal or easily exchangeable across individuals. Second, that humans are rational agents unaffected by their environment and holding stable preferences that are exchangeable through time.

To address the first issue, my third DPhil chapter[3] introduced the PRISM Alignment Dataset—the first large-scale human feedback dataset with genuinely diverse geographic and demographic participation. PRISM maps the preferences of 1,500 participants from 75 countries across over 8,000 live conversations with 21 different language models. My findings revealed substantial preference variation across individual, cultural, and contextual dimensions. People often disagreed fundamentally about desirable AI behaviors, preference signals contained inherent noise, and the power dynamics of who provides feedback materially affects whose values get encoded in AI systems. Building on PRISM's foundation, I am now examining how participants perceive frontier AI systems that are specifically trained on their preferences through Personalised RLHF. This closes an important empirical loop to test whether systems aligned to individual preferences actually better serve those individuals—an assumption often taken for granted in alignment research.

My final DPhil chapter[4] challenges the second set of assumptions by investigating how human preferences are themselves shaped by interactions with AI, particularly those displaying human-like traits—what one of my supervisors Prof Chris Summerfield aptly calls "the siren call of anthropomorphic AI".



This study is the first to investigate human-AI interaction with cutting-edge steering vector methodology—essentially performing "brain surgery" on AI models by manipulating specific activation patterns in their internal weights—combined with robust randomised controlled trials involving an experiment with thousands of UK citizens tracked over four weeks. We hypothesize that even individuals who initially express preferences against anthropomorphic AI systems find themselves increasingly drawn to such systems in real-life interactions. This evidence demonstrates how preferences are endogenously shaped by AI, a fundamental challenge to conventional alignment frameworks.

Looking Back and Forward Across Four Years of Accelerating Change

As I prepare to write up my DPhil thesis in the coming year, I'm struck by how much the field has evolved and how much remains to be explored. The pace at which conceptual frameworks transition to deployed technologies has been staggering, transforming abstract concerns into “boots on the ground” societal challenges.

One of my DPhil chapters[5] written in 2023 hypothesised about the rise of personalised AI assistants, enumerating the benefits and risks for individuals and society. What was speculation then is now reality. Just recently in April 2025, OpenAI announced enhanced memory capabilities for ChatGPT, enabling it to remember conversation history and dynamically adapt to user preferences.

Similarly, my work on the challenges of human-AI relationships has taken on new urgency. In early 2024, I began writing another DPhil chapter[6] about socioaffective alignment—examining how AI systems behave within the psychological ecosystem they co-create with human users. Back then the subreddit for Character AI, a platform where users chat with AI personas representing fictional characters or companions, had just north of 500,000 members. It now has 2.5 million, illustrating how rapidly humans are forming deep social bonds with AI.s.

Against this rapidly changing environment, what difference then has my research made in a world transformed by AI? Through this body of research, we now have empirical evidence that human-AI interaction is characterised by significant idiosyncratic variation in preferences, cultural differences that manifest in complex patterns, cognitive vulnerabilities to AI influence, and dynamic preference shifts that reveal humans as active participants rather than static observers in AI interactions.

I feel fortunate that this work has already had substantial impact—my DPhil research has been cited nearly 2,000 times, our dataset has been downloaded almost 20,000 times, and the PRISM dataset received a best paper award at NeurIPS, a top AI conference, from among over 16,000 submissions.

What distinguishes this research is its commitment to challenging fundamental assumptions at the boundaries of disciplines. By bringing insights from economics, psychology, and social science into a technically-oriented field, we've enriched our understanding of what alignment truly entails.

Beyond disciplinary diversity, this work has greatly benefited from the wise mentorship of my supervisors, Dr Scott A Hale, Dr Bertie Vidgen and Prof Chris Summerfield, as well as collaboration with an extraordinary network of researchers. I'm grateful for how much I've learned working alongside co-authors from academic institutions worldwide, partnering with industry AI developers at MetaAI, Microsoft, Google DeepMind, and OpenAI, and collaborating with policymakers and scientists during my placement at the UK Government's AI Security Institute. The generous funding from the Economic and Social Research Council has been instrumental in supporting this research agenda that marries the worlds of social science and computer science.

What has become abundantly clear to me is that alignment is not merely a technical problem to be solved, but a complex sociotechnical challenge that requires ongoing dialogue between disciplines, cultures, and stakeholders. Four years ago, this perspective was emerging at the margins of AI research. Today, it's essential to our collective understanding of how AI will integrate into human society. Even though my DPhil comes to an end this year, the journey continues, and the next four years may bring even more profound changes than the last.

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OIV MELBOURNE WRAP UP:

MY OVERSEAS INSTITUTIONAL VISIT EXPERIENCE

Emily Ankers

In October 2024 I left the Northern hemisphere's autumn, to spend around 10 weeks in the Southern hemisphere's spring as a visiting Doctoral Researcher at Deakin University's Waurn Ponds campus in Geelong, close to Melbourne.

I was warmly greeted on campus by Dr Zoe Avner. Zoe is a poststructural theory expert, working within sport coaching courses at Deakin. Zoe arranged my access to one of the PGR offices, and I was soon settled in my new co-working space.

During my visit there were many opportunities to present and network. I presented my PhD findings on women and gender diverse people's experiences of climbing at Deakin's Women in Sport interest group alongside Paloma de Castro, who presented her fascinating research on women's football fan culture in Brazil. As a result, I was invited to two more interest group seminars, one at Deakin and one at the University of Melbourne, where I got to hear more about locally based research into gender and sport. Additionally, I was invited to an invaluable writing workshop where I learnt skills that have been transformative to my academic writing practice.

I also had the opportunity to head up to the sunny Gold Coast, where I took morning ocean swims each day before the Australian Women's and Gender Studies Association (AWGSA) conference. AWGSA was the best conference I have ever attended, and not just because of the swimming opportunities. The level of scholarship in intersectional and diverse feminist studies and methodologies was outstanding, and I met so many people doing fantastic research.

The trip to the Gold Coast simultaneously allowed me to visit family in Brisbane, a lovely by-product of my OIV. There were also lots of chances for mini adventures, climbing, and even a short trip to Tasmania.

The formal networking and presentation opportunities form a key part of the OIV, but on reflection, I am most grateful for all the individuals I made connections with. My official host, Zoe Avner, became a climbing and walking buddy along with her very cute labrador Lando.

We had so many brilliant conversations about research and academia while walking the coastal path. I met a wonderful PhD student called Talia at the AWGSA conference. Talia had a conference a few weeks later in Geelong where I was based, so we met for dinner and a catch up about our PhD progress.

I established a connection with Dr Rebecca Olive at RMIT University, and we had a rich discussion about environmentalism, indigenous land rights and climbing over coffee. There were so many more people, too many to name, but this for me was the number one take away from the OIV: the chance to meaningfully connect in person with other scholars across the world. I would now absolutely consider a future career in Australia that perhaps I would not have before the OIV.

REFLECTIONS ON IMPACTS OF THE RECENT UK SUPREME COURT RULING ON 'SEX'

Milo Edwards

In this article, I reflect on the recent UK Supreme Court Ruling on the meaning of 'sex' in the Equality Act, 2010. I consider the implications that it has for myself, other trans people, and my DPhil research.

My research explores the use of archival prompts related to LGBTQ+ experiences of students from the 1970s onwards in discussing current LGBTQ+ student experiences at Bristol, Oxford and Sussex universities. I reflect on English university histories, why/how they exist and the impacts they have on LGBTQ+ students. This can challenge long-standing reputations of universities as institutions and the claims they make about their histories.

I conduct this research alongside an increasingly precarious political situation for trans people in the UK. On the 16th of April, The UK Supreme Court ruled on the meanings of 'man', 'woman' and 'sex' in the Equality Act 2010. In an 'interim update on the practical implications' of this by the EHRC, clarification was given around use of single-sex spaces for trans people. There are many potential repercussions of this ruling.

While my research is not focused on the single-sex space use of transgender people, my identity, how I move through institutional spaces, and the conversations I am involved in as a queer researcher are complicated by those political discourses.

In the context of this political contention, sometimes, sharing my research focus feels like an act of bravery, almost as though I am now inviting people to initiate a debate with me about transgender rights in our first meeting. In my experience, this has risen with greater politicisation of trans identities and situating of discussions about trans existences as 'debates' where either side argues a case.

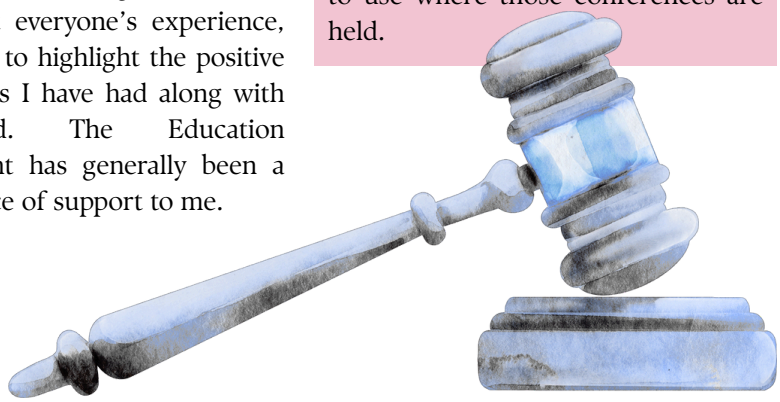
It is important to note that my experience of being trans has been a happy one at times. For example, I told one academic in my department that I had changed my name and planned to inform people in the new academic year, and when I came back to the department for Michaelmas, my name on all registration sheets and name tags had been updated without me having to ask.

From that moment, I was known as 'Milo' to everyone, which made me feel accepted and reduced the number of awkward conversations about the name change. I am aware this is not everyone's experience, but I want to highlight the positive experiences I have had along with the bad. The Education Department has generally been a great source of support to me.

Still, I wonder about the experiences of other students in relation to the recent developments and if those experiences impact their views of institutional histories. Meanwhile, I am concerned that the implications of the Ruling will change over the next year, and the interviews I conduct could be quite different from each other depending on when they take place. I keep searching for contingency statements or disclaimers to locate my writing in a particular time, as even my first draft of this article was outdated when it came to writing my second draft.

So, I await more news on how universities will respond to the Ruling to understand the implications for my life, research, and trans people's lives more generally.

Additionally, I wonder how those developments will affect my research over the three years of my PhD and the responses I might expect to my work. I wonder which questions I will be fielding at conferences and which bathrooms I will be permitted to use where those conferences are held.



A BRIEF REFLECTION ON CHANGE

Andrew Lika

For the past few years, I thought that whatever research I would do would be related to domestic abuse (DA). Part of me felt, and still feels, responsible for giving back to a field that had supported me and my family. I have done plenty of volunteering for domestic abuse charities like Women's Aid, and I have helped coordinate a small bit of research on DA media portrayals with Level Up and Advocacy After Domestic Abuse. About six weeks into the MSc in Criminology and Criminal Justice, I began to realise that studying domestic abuse was really challenging.

The very 'thing' I thought made me a good candidate to do research in this area, personal experience, made it difficult for me to immerse myself in the topic. I was, at first, frightened to change my topic. After all, the ESRC provided my funding based on my original application. But I was (very happily) surprised by how supportive the ESRC were in my topic change.

Initially, the change felt like I had lost part of my "identity". Who am I, if not a domestic abuse researcher-activist?

I've decided I am simultaneously the same and a different person. I am still someone dedicated to understanding the relationships between the state, local government, and families. But, having felt inspired by my supervisor, Professor Rachel Condry, I am now someone doing this through the lens of truancy laws at the intersection of criminology and education. I have felt warmly embraced by an awesome organisation in this space, Square Peg.

I now know I am not someone studying domestic abuse, which I am beginning to realise is okay.

FIELDWORK AND CHILDREN: REFLECTIONS ON BEING IN TWO PLACES AT ONCE

Nick Sidwell

I can split my academic study into two stages. In the first, I completed a BA in English Literature and then an MA in Publishing Studies. A fifteen-year career in books and newspapers followed. During this time, a host of experiences drew me ever closer to topics found at the heart of critical environmental geography.

At some indefinable point, the scales tipped. The career path I was on gave way to my desire to explore these subjects further. In September 2022, I began the second part of my academic training with an MSc in the geography department at the University of Bristol.

That same month, my eldest daughter began her own educational journey with her first day at school.

While my daughter and I enjoyed the novelty of 'starting school' together, with my wife I discussed the impact of the change on family life, particularly the new commitments that research presented.

I use ethnographic methods to explore the technologies and politics of biodiversity governance. For my Masters dissertation, this involved spending a week at a rewilding project up in the Scottish Highlands.

As my ambitions to pursue doctoral study took shape, the question of fieldwork became a central one at home. Geographical fieldwork can involve being away, sometimes overseas, for anywhere from a few weeks to a year.

With two young daughters, this was not going to be possible for my family. Nor did I personally want to be apart from my children for extended periods of time.

As I put my doctoral proposal together, I thought carefully about how I could conduct high quality ethnographic work and allow myself to develop as a researcher while still being there for my children. During this process, I came across academic literature that speaks to this experience.

All sorts of factors condition our individual capacities to access research sites. Going out into the field to conduct research, for whatever period of time, is a privilege.

As I navigate the path ahead, I am hoping to dedicate a section of my thesis methodology, and potentially a journal paper, to the questions I have chewed over at length.

I feel I have been very lucky both to receive funding from the Grand Union DTP, without which my project would not be possible, and to have found a supervisor who has helped me from our very first contact to design a project that is both academically rigorous and accessible.

In the coming months, I will start my doctoral fieldwork which will involve two substantial pieces of ethnographic work in Oxfordshire and nearby counties. I will be able to fulfil my research commitments and still be there at the school gates more-or-less on time.

Now though I must go and help my daughter with her own research into arctic foxes for a school science project. Did you know they have fur on their soles to keep their paws warm? It is a wonderful thing, to always be learning something new.

INSPIRED BY PRACTICE:

DEVELOPING RESEARCH ON PSYCHOLOGICALLY INFORMED ENVIRONMENTS IN THE FIELD OF ADULT LITERACY AND HOMELESSNESS

Kat Goodacre

After completing my PGCE1 in Adult Literacy and ESOL2 in 2016, I worked as a Literacy and Dyslexia Specialist Teacher as part of a Learning Team at a homelessness service, based in London. My job involved teaching literacy to adults, either 1-1, or in small groups, at a range of levels. I arrived as a qualified teacher with a decade of experience supporting people with disabilities and learning support needs. However, understanding the needs of adult learners experiencing chronic homelessness and compound trauma3 was something I largely learnt on the job, through talking to my learners. Many had struggled with literacy difficulties or dyslexia throughout their lives, and negative early learning experiences frequently made them fearful of the classroom learning environment. I learnt that the shame and vulnerability associated with literacy difficulties and past experiences, made establishing trust, empathy, and positive relationships with learners foundational to any literacy teaching or support I provided.

In 2017 I began my Master's Degree (MA) in Specific Learning Difficulties (Dyslexia), and the requirement to carry out some research as part of my MA is what began my journey as a practitioner/researcher. Reading highlighted a lack of existing research exploring literacy and homelessness, and I began thinking about the unique insight my work may provide in this area.

Inspired by my teaching practice, my research involved 10 semi-structured interviews with adult literacy learners experiencing homelessness, some of whom were my own learners, and some who worked with my colleague. The interviews explored participants experiences of literacy learning, their motivation to engage in literacy provision at the service, and perception of what helped them to learn. 70% of participants disclosed a diagnosis of dyslexia (either childhood diagnosis or at the service), and the majority had traumatic early learning experiences, impacting the way they saw themselves as learners. Positive relationships with teachers who not only empathised but were able to help them understand and address their literacy difficulties, were found to improve self-esteem and self-efficacy related to their literacy learning4.

After publishing my MA research in 2020, I began thinking about ways I consciously and unconsciously applied 'values' associated with PIEs (for example positive relationships, empathy, reflection, action learning) into my teaching practice and approach to supporting my learners. In the absence of specific training related to teaching people experiencing homelessness and compound trauma, I became curious as to if and how other literacy teachers working in homelessness services understand and use PIEs.

Though my experience as a practitioner, I am acutely aware of the barriers many learners experience to engaging with mainstream and community adult education. This has led me to wonder about the relevance and usefulness of PIEs within wider adult literacy teaching and learning environments.

Thus, my current PhD research explores the use of PIEs for adult literacy learners experiencing homelessness and compound trauma, via in-depth interviews, with adult literacy teachers and learners, in homelessness services across the UK.

My research will provide insight into how PIEs are currently being used to inform the teaching practices of adult literacy teachers working in homelessness services, and how this influences experiences of literacy learning within these services from the perspectives of both teachers and learners.

While my data analysis is not yet complete, initial reflections on my findings suggest literacy teachers in homelessness primarily aim to create relationship based, person-centred, learner-led, and flexible literacy provision designed to support and develop learner's confidence with basic literacy and positive learning experiences support learner trust and engagement.

Yet specific training for teachers on how PIEs can be used to inform teaching, planning, and reflection on teaching is currently lacking, and the development of training in this area is recommended to improve practice. PIE approaches are perceived by teachers as fundamental in helping learners reach a point where they feel ready and able to move on to further training, volunteering, accredited courses, or employment as people move forwards on their journey out of homelessness.

References:
[1] PGCE: Postgraduate Certificate in Education
[2] ESOL: English for speakers of other languages
[3] Sometimes referred to as 'complex trauma', compound trauma is defined as: multiple, cumulative experiences of emotional or psychological trauma, usually within the context of inter-personal relationships. Cockersell, P. (ed.) (2018) Social Exclusion, Compound Trauma and Recovery: Applying Psychology, Psychotherapy and PIE to Homelessness and Complex Needs. Illustrated edition. London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
[4] Goodacre, K. and Sumner, E. (2020) 'Overcoming the hurdles: Understanding motivation and supporting adult learners with poor literacy and dyslexia in the homelessness sector', Dyslexia Journal. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/dys.1664.
[5] Johnson, R. (2023) Psychologically Informed Environments from the ground up: Service design for complex needs. Fertile Imagination Press; Johnson, R. and Haigh, R. (2011) 'Social psychiatry and social policy for the 21st century: new concepts for new needs - the "Enabling Environments" initiative', Mental Health and Social Inclusion, 15(1), pp. 17–23. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5042/mhsi.2011.0054; PIELink (2023c) From PIEs 1 to PIEs 2.0 – PIELink. Available at: http://pielink.net/pies-2-0/ (Accessed: 4 April 2023).

ENGAGING IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES AS A PHD STUDENT:

REFLECTIONS ON CO-EDITING A BERA BITE

Lucy Robinson

During my GUDTP-funded DPhil at Oxford, I was always on the lookout for professional development opportunities to help support my wish to pursue a career in academia. This short reflection piece is about one such activity, co-editing a BERA Bite.

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) is "the leading authority on educational research in the UK, supporting and representing the community of scholars, practitioners and everyone engaged in and with educational research both nationally and internationally" (2025).

Having been a student member for several years and having written a BERA blog post previously, I was eager to engage in another professional development opportunity offered by BERA; co-editing a BERA Bite.

Therefore, alongside my friend and fellow GUDTP-funded DPhil student Joanna Rankin, we collated 13 existing BERA blog posts covering a range of themes related to developing one's early career researcher profile and skillset. As part of the Bite, we asked all the original authors of the blogs to suggest three questions for discussion, designed to encourage readers to explore the ideas presented in the blogs further. Joanna also led on writing the editorial for the Bite, providing a perfect introduction to the resource.

Topics in the Bite are far ranging. They move from reflecting on one's positionality, through attending and presenting at one's first conference, to planning the next steps in an academic career. In doing so, the aim of our Bite was to offer something for all the educational research community, albeit with a focus on early career researchers.

Working with Joanna was both a fruitful endeavour and a welcome break from focusing on writing up my thesis! I would wholeheartedly recommend engaging in collaborative writing and/or editing opportunities with fellow students as part of your PhD journey.

If you are interested in editing or co-editing a BERA Bite, you can find out more about the process through https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/bera-bites. Note, you don't have to be a member of BERA to guest edit a collection.

Scholars Association Summary

Yearly Roundup

The Scholars Association (SA) Committee plays a key role in building an engaged and supportive community for GUDTP scholars. By working with scholars, the Senior Management Team (SMT), the GUDTP Management Board (MB), and partner institutions, the Committee fosters connections organises activities, and represents the scholar community at management level.

In October, the SA welcomed new students with an informal pub trip, giving scholars a chance to meet and connect. We also launched a WhatsApp Group to improve communication and share updates directly with scholars.

November marked the first official SA Committee Meeting, where we developed plans for the year ahead. We also launched the monthly Online Tea Time Check-In Sessions, offering scholars a relaxed space to discuss challenges and highlights, seek peer support, and raise issues or feedback relating to the DTP experience. These sessions allow scholars to voice concerns in a private, student-to-student format, which the SA Chairs can then relay to the DTP management.

In March, we issued a call for submissions to the Grand Union Magazine—an annual publication showcasing the impact of scholars' research, reflections on the DTP programme (such as internships and OIVs), methodological challenges, and other academic milestones. We look forward to sharing this year's edition soon and will issue a new call for contributions for the next edition.

In May, the SA launched a Virtual Writing Retreat—a collaborative, online space for scholars to focus on their writing in structured time blocks, share ideas, set goals, and boost productivity. The retreat is now a monthly event, helping to build a sense of community while supporting individual progress.

Looking ahead to June, we are excited to host the GUDTP Conference, which promises to be a vibrant event fostering collaboration, knowledge exchange, and skill development across disciplines. We look forward to hearing about your research!

As the academic year winds down, the SA Committee is busy planning for the next academic year. If there are events or activities you'd like to see, please get in touch—we'd love to hear from you.

Upcoming Events

- GUDTP Scholars Association Monthly Drop-in
  The Scholars Association has organised drop-in session for scholars to attend.
  When: Every 1st Tuesday of each Month | 12:00-1:00 or 17:00-18:00 Alternately
  Where: Online| Teams
  Add to your calendar:
  July session | https://shorturl.at/j7JLY

- Half-Day Writing Spaces
  The Scholars Association has created a permanent virtual writing space for GU DTP students.
  When: Every 2nd and 4th Wednesday of each Month |10:00–14:00
  Where: Online| Teams
  If you have any questions, please email ope.olusoga@open.ac.uk.

GRAND UNION
doctoral training partnership

The Grand Union Magazine is the publication of the ESRC Grand Union Doctoral Training Partnership. The magazine provides a platform to celebrate the lives and work of Grand Union Scholars and Alumni. Articles showcase dynamic, interdisciplinary, and innovative research, fostering a space for collaboration, conversation, and knowledge sharing. It is also a space for authors to go beyond the academic, reflecting on life as Grand Union scholars. The magazine aims to provide a supportive and respectful environment for authors to begin or continue their publishing journey. Launched 2025, the Grand Union Magazine will be published annually, both online and in print, by the Scholars Association.