

**Welcome to Politics**

**A Guide for PhD  
Researchers**



**Political Studies  
Association**



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**EARLY CAREER  
NETWORK**



## Life as a Politics PhD researcher

So, you've embarked upon a PhD in Politics. Whether your thesis explores gender, security, legislatures, environmentalism, political theory or one of any number of other topics, we've written this welcome guide so that you can hit the ground running as a PhD researcher. Every PhD is different, so we hope that no matter how far into your thesis you are, we can offer a couple of new pointers that can come in handy.

Life as a PhD researcher is a broad one. Conferences, teaching, publishing, conducting research - no two days are the same. In this document, which we think will be useful again and again during your PhD, we provide thoughts and experiences about each of the many aspects of life as a PhD researcher. We couldn't summarise everything, but we have provided brief overviews so that you can feel as confident as possible about the road ahead.

The Political Studies Association (PSA) exists to develop and promote the study of politics. Founded in 1950, we are the leading Association in our field in the United Kingdom, with an international membership including academics in political science and current affairs, theorists and practitioners, policy-makers, researchers, school teachers and students in HE.

The PSA Early Career Network (ECN) exists to represent the interests of postgraduate students, postdoctoral researchers and early career academics within the PSA. It opens a space that specifically addresses the interests and needs of postgraduates and early career researchers in an independent, peer-based environment; while still getting support from the PSA Executive when required.

Membership of the PSA is open to everyone interested in the study of politics, including scholars in other fields working on political topics. The PSA is actively engaged in promoting the study of politics and arranges events throughout the UK. For more information, see our [events' pages](#). Follow the PSA at [@PolStudiesAssoc](#) or on [Facebook](#), and the ECN at [@PSA\\_ECN](#) and the [Facebook group](#)



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## Finding Your Feet

Starting a PhD is an exciting but often daunting prospect. In the first few weeks and months of your programme it is a good idea to begin by planning your time to be as efficient as possible. How many hours a day do you intend to spend on your thesis? You may feel that you need to spend every waking hour on your project, but that approach is the path to burning out. Do you have other commitments, such as a part-time job, you need to fit around your studies? Finding time to include socialising and fitness activities will often pay dividends in improved productivity.

It's also important to plan when you need to have completed certain data collection or submitted drafts to your supervisor. Also think about any deadlines for calls for papers or pots of funding. A PhD can often feel hectic and all-consuming. It's crucial to employ good time management to ensure that you get the best from the experience, save time in the long-run, and maintain a sense of balance in your life.





## Finding Your Community

It can be very helpful to link up with other researchers early on in your academic journey. There is often a temptation to wait a bit longer before 'networking', so that you're as familiar with your topic as possible. In our experience, the sooner Graduate Students and 'Early Career Academics' (ECAs - those within three years of acquiring their PhD) get to know people who are on the same step in the career ladder, or in the same field, the more confident they feel.

Sumedh Rao, the PSA ECN Chair, looks forward to welcoming all new ECN members. Sumedh says, "for those working on issues related to politics, irrespective of discipline, the Early Career Network (ECN) provides a supportive community and an invaluable network, with which to build contacts, develop a research profile and advance your skills base."



To meet experts in your field, joining one or two of the **PSA's Specialist Groups** is a great place to start. The PSA operates over 50 such Groups, covering a diverse range of themes, such as Comparative European Politics, Parliaments and Legislatures, Qualitative Research, and Scandinavian Politics, amongst many others. These groups often run annual events related to their fields of research, and also organise specialist panels at the PSA Annual Conference. Most of these Specialist Groups don't charge an additional membership fee other than requiring membership of the PSA, and many offer grants and bursaries for attending events. We are certain that at least one Group will be relevant to your thesis, so why not get in touch and see what events they are running?



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The PSA provides an **Early Career Network (ECN)** that comprises of PhD researchers, teaching fellows and postdoctoral researchers.

The ECN hosts a range of events throughout the academic year, including a research conference, skills workshops and social events. ECN members who are presenting papers can apply to an Access Fund for support to attend the PSA's Annual Conference. They can also acquire Travel Grants through the PSA to visit and present research at conferences, both at home and abroad. You can join now and get a full membership for just £20!

Follow [@PSA\\_ECN](#) and join the [Facebook group](#)





## Publishing in Academia

One of the most well-known challenges in academia is getting published. There is a common mantra that researchers need to 'publish or perish'. While this phrase is clearly an extreme interpretation, it is important for ECAs to show that they have experience of the publishing process.

A great way to get an early publication under your belt is to write a book review for a journal. As you'll be reading through a lot of existing research for your literature review anyway, book reviews offer a great way to become familiar with your field whilst also getting an early publication. Many journals have review sections, and even specific review editors, who are always on the lookout for new contributions and contributors.

The PSA publishes four journals and a magazine with our publishing partner, **SAGE**. **Political Studies Review (PSR)** is likely to be the best place to start for publishing your first book review. PSR receives more books each year than it can review, so new reviewers are always welcome. Reviewers receive a free copy of the book that they volunteer to review, so why not get in touch with PSR's Book Review Editor and offer to write a 400 word **review about a recent book related to your topic?**



Looking beyond book reviews, the PSA has produced a free **Guide to Publishing** that gives tips on how to publish journal articles, the process of turning your thesis into a book, and how to have an online presence, amongst other challenges. We would also recommend buying or borrowing one of the many guidebooks on how to get published, as well as reading SAGE's own guide on how to publish in its journals. We also run a 'meet the editors session' at the annual conference which is always well attended.





## Join the PSA

The PSA is home to some of the world's leading political thinkers, and we're always looking for new members to join, no matter where they are in their career. One of our most important roles is supporting the development of the next generation of researchers in our field. That's why we make sure that there are many reasons to get involved, no matter what your subject, experience or career priorities.

The PSA offers all PhD students and Early Career Academics **full membership for just £20**. [You can join the PSA here](#). ECN members are additionally eligible to access the following:

- The Annual PSA ECN Postgraduate Research Conference, where early career academics can present their findings.
- Travel grants for ECN events, including the annual Postgraduate Research Conference.
- The chance to apply for ECN member-led events funding, providing up to £600 for you to run an event or conference.





## Attending Conferences

A key stepping stone on the path to getting published is the presentation of your research at an academic workshop or conference. Generally, workshops will be smaller affairs, with around 12-15 people submitting papers and discussing each draft in depth, sometimes with a view to authoring a collective 'edited volume' (a book with each chapter written by different authors). Conferences can range in size, depending on the specificity of the subject matter, going up to thousands of participants in the case of bigger global conferences.

Conferences are usually broken into panels, often with a couple of keynote speeches from big-name academics peppered in between these panels. Each conference is different, but the PSA model is often employed elsewhere: panels last around 90 minutes, featuring a Chair, and three or four presenters who each have 12-15 minutes to summarise their draft work, before questions are taken from the audience.

To become a presenter at a conference, you must first have your abstract accepted by the conference organisers. There is normally a Call for Papers, which is shared several months, or even a year, before the conference. For example, the PSA's Annual Conference takes place in a different city each year in the week before Easter, and the ECN holds its graduate conference in the summer. The PSA and ECN conferences include professional development sessions, and financial support is available to PhD students to attend. The Call for Papers will usually be made available in the previous summer, with a deadline for abstracts having passed in the autumn. The PSA website lists relevant [conferences and events](#).

When writing an abstract for a conference, it is vital to stick to the word limit. Use your words carefully to outline the challenge you are tackling, why it matters, the cases you are looking at, and your rough argument. Finally, always be sure to ask your supervisors to give you feedback on how your abstract is looking, before you submit it. As well as receiving feedback on your work, conferences can be extremely useful for meeting people who share similar research interests.





## Hints for Networking

- Make sure you can summarise your research area in approximately 30 seconds, in a way that emphasises why it is interesting and important.
- Suggest meeting people for a coffee during the event if you know that they are attending and want to discuss something specific.
- Bring business cards that have your email address on.
- Ask for an individual's email address after a good conversation and send a follow-up email after meeting.
- To stay energised throughout a two- or three-day event, it's sometimes worth missing one or two panels to recuperate in your room. It's better to feel enthusiastic throughout, rather than wear yourself out before you meet the person you really want to impress!





## Tips for Teaching

Teaching your first class can often feel slightly nerve-racking but getting experience in the seminar room is a crucial part of succeeding in modern academia. Often, Departments or Faculties will run classes on teaching skills which can provide invaluable information on teaching. These may even be a requirement before teaching is allowed. Here are our top tips when it comes to teaching Politics in a UK university:

1. Outline the structure of the seminar at the beginning of each class. It will help you to feel clear about the 50 or so minutes ahead, and the students will get an immediate grounding in what they need to understand and why.
2. Give students time to think before answering your questions. This is a real tough one; just a few seconds of silence can feel like a lifetime when you're teaching. But giving students time to think about the question without the tutor jumping in is crucial to ensuring a high level of engagement.
3. Have a back-up task or discussion that you only turn to if you have spare time. Sometimes, for whatever reason, an activity may not take as long as you expect, particularly if your students are shy at the start of a new academic year or term. Having a back-up ensures that you always feel prepared, and your teaching will be more confident as a result.
4. Start each seminar with a brief discussion of the top news stories. Politics is everywhere, so there is always something in the news for students to discuss. Devoting three or four minutes at the start of each seminar to an informal chat can make students feel more confident and lessens their fear of 'saying something wrong'.
5. Be innovative. Politics seminars are an ideal forum for trying out new teaching techniques: Split the class into NGOs and business lobbyists who have to persuade you to make a policy decision... Run a simulation of the United Nations... Hold a mock debate in Parliament... The possibilities are endless!





## The PSA's Teaching and Learning Network

The Teaching and Learning Network is a newly established network, formerly the Teaching and Learning Specialist Group, to provide a network for colleagues who are interested in exploring pedagogic issues within the context of the Politics discipline. Each year the Network hosts a number of panels at the PSA Annual Conference.

*"Sharing good teaching and learning practices is incredibly important, for both academics/HE teachers and students. The PSA Teaching and Learning Network is a community of practice, for those new to academia and those who are more established, where best practice can be recognised, scholarship and research disseminated, and university teaching supported. Building on over a decade of work as a PSA specialist group, the Network encourages all PSA members to engage with its work. For more information, take a look at our [webpage](#)"*

**(Dr Donna Smith, Co-Chair, PSA Teaching and Learning Network).**





## The British University Landscape

There are over 100 higher education institutions in the UK, and the PSA has members at many of them. But we need your help to make sure we are representing all parts of the British academic landscape in politics.

The Early Career Network is recruiting now for representatives in politics departments to help us with spreading news about our events and making decisions about what we do.

If you are interested in becoming a **PSA Early Career Network Representative** in your department, or would like more information, please contact the committee by emailing [ecn@psa.ac.uk](mailto:ecn@psa.ac.uk) or get in touch on Twitter ([@PSA\\_ECN](https://twitter.com/PSA_ECN)) or through the [Facebook](#) group.

We particularly welcome ECN representatives from newer institutions, and those outside of the traditional research-intensive universities.

For ECAs, it's also useful to be up-to-speed with some of the following terms, as they're crucial parts of life as a Politics academic in the UK:

- **The Research Excellence Framework (REF):** The REF is the UK's system for assessing the quality of research and then determining how to allocate research funding to universities. These assessments are carried out through discipline based 'units of assessment' and look at the research environment and the impact of the research. The next REF will be taking place in 2021.
- **Research Impact:** As part of the REF, universities are asked to submit 'Impact Case Studies', which demonstrate how the research submitted has made a difference beyond academia. Ensuring that research has a wider impact is of increasing importance, in the REF and beyond, and funding bodies often want to know how projects will achieve impact as part of their decision-making process.
- **The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF):** The TEF seeks to assess teaching quality. Assessments began in 2017 and the government has just announced a review of the TEF to report in the summer of 2019





## Achieving Research and Impact

As mentioned above, it's increasingly important to demonstrate that your research can achieve impact in the wider world. To be most effective, you may even want to consider how to include impact when you are first designing your thesis project. For many Politics academics, the ideal means of achieving impact may be to influence government policy, **although this is often very difficult! One way to try to do so is to provide evidence to a Select Committee inquiry**. We also run an annual placement scheme that allows PhD students to work for usually four months with a parliamentary select committee and the feedback from participants has been universally positive so do consider this option.

Achieving impact does not necessarily mean that you have changed government policy, though. Blogging and sharing your findings through social media can be a great way to influence people's thinking and to raise awareness of your work outside of academia. The **PSA Blog** is always on the look-out for new contributors – read **the Contributions and Editorial Policy** to find out how to start writing. Joining Twitter can also be a good way to develop your profile and you can follow the **PSA account** to hear about the latest news and events.

The PSA's flagship scheme for supporting impact via the media is Total Exposure, which gives members the chance to pitch an idea for a TV or Radio programme to a panel of commissioning editors from broadcasters such as Channel 4, Sky and the BBC. Those shortlisted are then invited to discuss their ideas with the panel. As well as being fun, this scheme allows you to raise your own profile and has the potential to give your research greater impact!





## Winning Grants and Prizes

You may have applied for funding prior to your acceptance on to your PhD. The main funding body for political science research and the wider social sciences is the **Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)**. The ESRC will be a relevant body to be aware of throughout your academic career. Your university will also be an excellent source of information on different funding opportunities. There may be funds available at different levels of the university, such as departmental or university-wide support. Funding may also be available for travel to conferences and for assistance with research. Your Head of Graduate Studies is likely to be the best person to speak to this.

Showing experience of winning small pots of funding can be a great way to demonstrate your awareness of how important grants are in academia. While it can be difficult to win larger research grants from external funders as a PhD researcher, some funders offer specific grants to ECAs. The **British Academy**, **ESRC**, and **Leverhulme Trust** may be good places to start looking.

The PSA awards a large number of **grants** to its members to support the presentation of research at overseas national PSA conferences. In recent years, ECA members of the PSA have visited the conferences of American PSA, Mexican PSA, Canadian PSA, Japanese PSA, New Zealand PSA, the International Political Science Association and more. The PSA also offers grants to subsidise the costs of attending its own Conference in the UK; keep an eye out when registration opens for the next conference and **submit an application**.

In addition to winning grants, winning a prize during your PhD can demonstrate your potential as a future world-leading researcher. The rule of thumb here is to apply for everything! Academia is all about persevering despite occasional setbacks, and there really is no downside to putting your name forward for a prize. Some PSA Specialist Groups, such as **Environmental Politics**, run prizes for the best ECA paper presented at the PSA Annual Conference.





## Winning Grants and Prizes - continued

Once you've passed your PhD, be sure to submit your dissertation for a 'Best Thesis' prize. **The PSA runs five such prizes on a variety of topics:** The Walter Bagehot Prize for Government and Public Administration; The Sir Ernest Barker Prize for Political Theory; The Lord Bryce Prize for International Relations/Comparative Studies; The McDougall Trust Prize for Elections, Electoral Systems or Representation; and The Elizabeth Wiskemann Prize for the Study of Inequality and Social Justice. The PSA also runs an Innovation in Teaching Politics Award, which is open to all academics, including ECAs. **BISA** and **UACES** also run their own competitions, more specifically relating to International Studies and to European Politics, respectively.

"In early June 2015, I had the opportunity to attend the Canadian Political Science Association's annual conference, held that year in the nation's capital, Ottawa. I was able to attend thanks to the PSA's overseas conference grant scheme, which is open to all members of the PSA including postgraduates.

The conference took place over three days, under the umbrella of the Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities, which brings together 70 national learned associations that all hold their annual meetings at the same time. With almost 9,000 people participating in total, it was an invigorating few days for scholarship in the social sciences and humanities. The paper I presented, on the panel 'Bureaucratic Independence and the Politics of Accountability in Public Institutions', was "Marching backwards into the future: investigating the CRTC's role in contemporary Canadian television broadcasting regulation" and looked at regulatory independence in the context of Canadian broadcasting policy reforms. I got valuable feedback on my paper and am in the process of publishing it as a journal article. Overall, the CPSA conference was a great opportunity for me both professionally and personally and a great opportunity to gain some international exposure."

-Kate Mattocks, Ph.D. student at City University London





## Your Viva

At the outset of your PhD, the 'Viva' (an abbreviation for viva voce or 'living voice') will feel a long way off. But it is a crucial, final step in gaining your doctorate. When the time comes, the following advice may be useful for defending your thesis confidently:

1. Be able to introduce your argument succinctly at the beginning, alongside the broader theoretical location of your work, your practical research findings and the methodological framework. Think about your central argument, what your research adds to pre-existing work and how it may challenge this literature too. Presenting at conferences and workshops during your PhD is a great way to build confidence and experience in talking about your work.
2. In the Viva, be prepared to defend your efforts, but also be accepting of other methods and be able to discuss them and why you think your approach was preferable. Every time you reach a stumbling block during your PhD, remind yourself that you're exploring different possibilities that you will need to talk about later. Remember: Every time you must change direction, you're just preparing for your Viva!
3. Check the policies and procedures of your institution and ensure you follow them.
4. Always take a printed version of the thesis with you to refer back to if necessary. Feel free to include sticky tabs that point to crucial pages or paragraphs you think you will want to refer to.
5. Finally, remember that you know this work inside out and the Viva is your chance to discuss what you have uncovered. No-one knows your topic as well as you, and it's a compliment that your examiners have taken the time to read through your work to give you feedback.





## Career Advice

The majority of ECAs will want to use your PhD as a launch pad into academia. When thinking about an academic career after your thesis, an excellent resource for looking for academic jobs is [www.jobs.ac.uk](http://www.jobs.ac.uk). This website has job listings that are specific to academic Politics positions and advertises postdoctoral fellowships.

It is also important to ensure that you take advantage of training opportunities during your studies, which you can discuss at job interviews. Of particular interest may be the [QStep workshops on quantitative methods](#), the [ESRC Methods Training workshops](#), and [ECPR Winter and Summer methods schools](#). Work experience across government and think tanks may also be useful in securing a post – the PSA's placement scheme and those run by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) provide an excellent opportunity to gain some real-world experience in Westminster.

If you are more interested in non-academic jobs after your doctorate, your university's careers service will be able to help you pursue your next steps.





## Don't forget – join the PSA for £20 today!

There's never been a better time to join the PSA. From unique members-only opportunities to meeting experts in your field, the PSA is your home throughout your PhD and beyond.

You can **join as an Early Career Member** for just £20, which entitles you to all the benefits of a PSA membership plus membership of the Early Career Network. Here's our top five list of ways to benefit from Europe's biggest Political Studies Association:

1. Attend the wide range of ECN events that take place throughout the year.
2. Get a free book, contribute to academic debates and see your name in print by publishing a book review with **Political Studies Review**.
3. Join other Early Career Academics through the PSA ECN, and join experts in your field by joining a PSA Specialist Group.
4. Submit an abstract for the **PSA Annual Conference**; or the ECN Postgraduate Conference and apply for **funding to attend at a discounted rate**.
5. Design your own TV/Radio show pitch and submit it to the **Total Exposure** competition.



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Elizabeth Meehan Suite

Regent House

Pratt Mews

London

NW10AD

[www.psa.ac.uk](http://www.psa.ac.uk)

020 7321 2545



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