



WELCOME TO POLITICS

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR PHD RESEARCHERS

2020-21 EDITION



Political Studies
Association

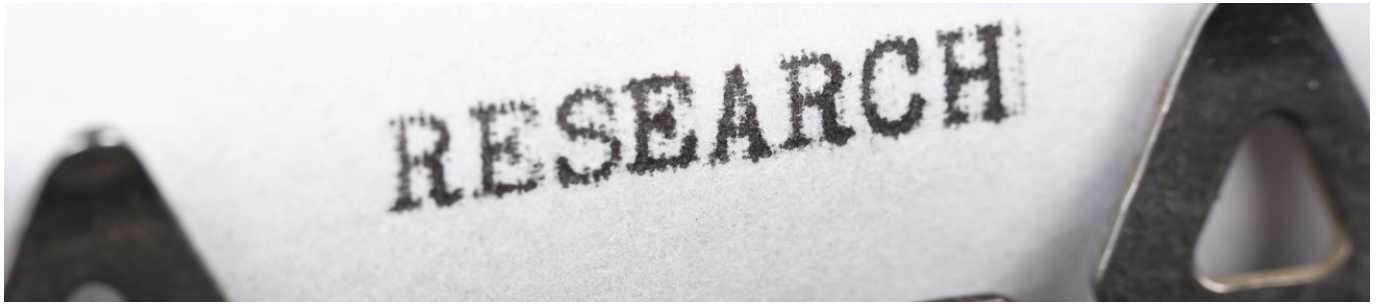


Political Studies Association
**EARLY CAREER
NETWORK**

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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, especially amid the uncertainties of our current post-COVID world. From virtual conferences to teaching, publishing, and conducting research - no two days are quite 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. 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](#), and the ECN at [@PSA_ECN](#) and the [Facebook group](#).



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.

One simple thing you can do is search out and read recent theses in your field, especially [prize-winning work](#). As well as being interesting and relevant, these can help you understand how you might go about structuring your work and making an argument to convince your examiners and other readers. This can make planning and writing a bit less daunting.

Finding your Community

You're part of the club! Here's how to find others.

There's the perception that the PhD journey is a solitary one, but it doesn't have to be. One of your first actions to undertake is to find your fellow PhD students and other ECRs (early career researchers) and join the wider research community. This can be from within your department, or through hashtags on Twitter and relevant Facebook Groups, or through conferences. Throughout this guide you'll find out how to engage in many of these, either through a chapter or through links to resources on the subject.

But one of the best resources available for you is ECN and the wider PSA – after all, it's one of the core reasons we exist. We bring people together, and in doing so we support the development of the next generation of researchers in our field.



 **Political Studies Association**

Be part of the UK's leading learning society, dedicated to the study and public understanding of politics

EC Early Career Researcher Membership

- Free Subscription to our four Academic Journals, SAGE Knowledge, members e-newsletter and quarterly membership magazine
- Tailored programme of events for Early Career Researchers
- Significant discount to our PSA Annual Conference
- Eligibility for the PSA's Research and Innovation Fund, PSA Prizes and Grants
- Access to the largest network of Political Scientists in the UK

 @PolStudiesAssoc

Visit www.psa.ac.uk/members for more information

just **£20** per year!

The advertisement features a background of yellow and blue polka dots and a photograph of three smiling people: a man in a suit, a man in a striped shirt, and a woman in a white top.

What's so special about the ECN then?


The ECN works because while also being part of, and supported by, the PSA we are ran by, and represent the interests of postgraduate students, postdoctoral researchers and early career academics within the PSA.

We do this by making sure that there are many ways to get involved and engage with the community, no matter what your subject area, experience or career priorities. We do this through workshops (offline and online), conferences, social feeds, newsletters, blogs, our new YouTube channel, and more!

The Network is represented by a Committee which operates on two-year terms.

[You can find more about the current ECN Committee here.](#)

Why don't you join more than 600 other ECN members today? Membership is open to all PhD students, and anyone within three years of their viva, full membership for £20 a year. With it, you get the full membership of the PSA too! [You can find out more and join today here.](#)



"The ECN is first and foremost designed to serve as an inclusive and supportive community for politics researchers of all disciplinary, cultural, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds."

Heather Alberro, PSA ECN Chair

Publishing in Academia: First Steps

One of the most well-known challenges in academia is getting published.

There is a common mantra that researchers need to ‘publish or perish’. This phrase is a little extreme, as ECRs can progress through teaching excellence, and the promise of future publications can count for something on the job market. However, on the whole, it is important for ECRs to show that their work is considered publishable by their peers and to show their familiarity with the publishing process.

A great way to get an early publication under your belt is to write a book review for a journal. Many journals have review sections, and even specific review editors: because of their own time constraints, they are always on the lookout for new contributions and contributors. With its publishing partner, SAGE, the **PSA publishes four journals** and a magazine (Political Insight). Political Studies Review (PSR) is an excellent outlet for publishing your first book review. 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?**

There are many other non-standard publishing opportunities for ECRs - some of which are outlined in **our blog on the subject**. For example, the PSA’s Political Insight prints accessible articles of just 2,500 words – peer-reviewed and well-cited, these offer similar benefits to other journal articles at lower costs in your valuable time.

To work towards those higher-impact publications, a wide range of advice is at your disposal. We recommend reading **SAGE’s own guide** on how to publish in its journals. At each PSA Annual Conference, we will run our popular ‘meet the editors’ session (virtually in 2021), allowing you to grill key people on what they and reviewers are looking for in your submissions. And don’t be afraid to use your own networks to share tips, frustrations and of course successes!

Why not listen to our ECN podcast *Backbenchers?* **Our first episode looks at 'From PhD to Published' a conversation with Dr Julianne K. Viola.**



Attending Conferences

Conferences are an important part of academic life (yes, even in lockdown)!

While there are conferences of all shapes and sizes – for example, your department or DTP (doctoral training partnership) may run their own events – we focus here on larger events with national/international audiences, generally the most rewarding for ECRs. Because it's just expected that we go to these kinds of conferences, we don't always think too deeply about why we do it. But their many benefits include:

- **Building your CV.** This will list all your conference papers, or at least the ones you want to highlight. Conferences help show potential employers that you're active and engaged with a research community. They can signal your future outputs, and acceptance at some conferences is, in its own right, a sign of your abilities – think about which conferences are a 'big deal' in your part of the discipline.
- **Understanding your field.** Conferences are a great chance to see what everyone's really up to in your discipline right now. What topics, methods and schools of thought are popular, and what is grabbing audiences? You might realise where the gaps really are and get a better sense of how to position yourself. You will also learn about expected standards of evidence and how you can make your own work robust to challenge.
- **Working towards new writing.** Conference feedback on 'work in progress' can help you build on strengths and iron out flaws, or even suggest alternate directions. At some conferences you'll be expected to write and circulate a paper with a 'discussant' and/or other panelists. This has a couple of benefits – discussants will be expected to give detailed feedback on the written piece, and it can force you to finally put pen to paper to meet the deadline!

But of course, you'll have to clear a few hurdles to get to your chosen conference in the first place. The first – easier than it sounds! – is to meet the deadline for abstracts. The Call for Papers is shared several months, or even a year, before the conference. Avoid being taken off-guard by putting them in your calendar at the first chance you get. The PSA website lists relevant conferences and events. In particular, the ECN runs its own annual conference in the mid-year tailored for ECRs – run as a large-scale online event, #BecauseTheInternet, in 2020 and (most likely) 2021. The PSA runs its annual conference around Easter and with ECN support, hosts a range of social and academic events tailored to ECRs.

The second is to get your abstract accepted by the panel organisers. If you have a choice of 'sections' – organised around subjects or sub-disciplines – choose carefully to maximise your chances. In your abstract, stick to the word limit, and use your words carefully to outline the challenge you are tackling, why it matters, the cases you are looking at, and your rough argument. Don't be afraid to use your peers or supervisors to find out how your abstract is shaping up.

Finally, if accepted, you'll want to obtain the funding you need to attend. ECRs self-funding is not unheard of, but is avoidable in most cases. If you can't get the money from your department or DTP to attend an national PSA conference overseas, consider applying to the [PSA's Randall International Conference Grant](#) early in the calendar year.

Hints for Networking

Any piece of advice that you find online, from your supervisors and peers will suggest that networking counts.

It is a vitally important activity that will go on to decide your career. But whilst networking is often described as a confined conference activity there's much more to it; it's something that which happens in PGR offices, online, and a myriad of other spaces.

There seems to be an almost immediate expectation that PhD students are social butterflies who can go out and 'work the room' with talented small-talk, which might come very easily to some but for others it's an incredibly daunting task.

Whilst researching the best approach to networking we've found the following things:

- Firstly, it over-emphasises how important networking is by presenting it as something that without, you'll undoubtedly fail. This ends up causing anxiety to those who aren't natural socialites or those who may be neurodivergent who as a result might find networking a challenge.

- There's a focus on it being all about conferences. Which isn't exactly helpful in the context of COVID-19.
- And finally, it turns building a network of peers, into a resource generation procedure – viewing your network as less of a social kinship, and into simply a thing to exploit.

But from our experience, we can tell you what networking isn't. It's certainly not barging into random people and woo'ing them. It's not something that is aimed at creating connections with famous established academics with the explicit purpose of getting a job down the line. It's certainly not trying to be the most popular kid in the room either. And it's not something to obsess about.

Our fabulous Communications Officer has written a full guide to ECR networking, particularly in a time where face to face events are almost impossible.

[Check out Dr Liam McLoughlin's full guide here.](#)

But, for now, here's our top tips:

Be happy. This may seem a bit insincere, but generally speaking, people don't want to engage with someone whose first interaction is for them to unload all their worries onto them like some emotional vampire. There's an old book called *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, in which it's discussed the value of smiling, and how it's often the first step to build new relationships. Later studies finding that smiling people are more likely to be rated as likeable, confident and stable – all traits people look for in a collaborative academic relationship. Meanwhile, people who don't smile are often rated as unfriendly and unapproachable and therefore you're less likely to engage with them. Likewise, if you're connecting via social media, it's equally important to keep a positive tone to your messages.

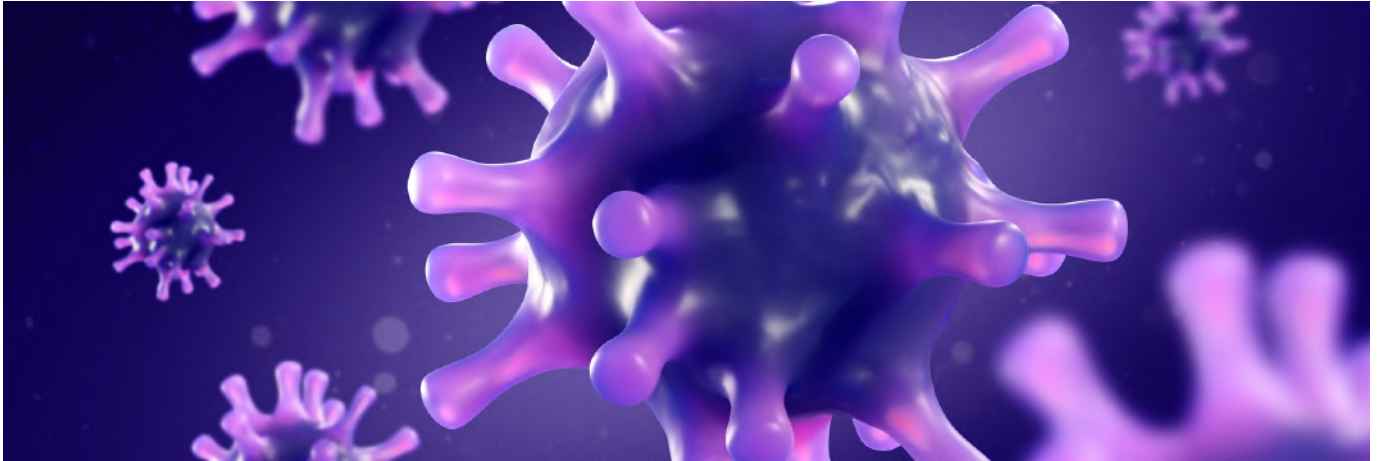
DON'T BE THE ANGRY PERSON. Many of us have been to events where there's one person who responds to a presentation with unfair and overly targeted criticism, sometimes spilling over to comments which are purely rude or passive-aggressive. Don't be that person.

Don't overemphasise the need to tell others about yourself. In the eyes of your peers, how much you're willing to listen and engage with them is just as important as how much you're willing to talk about how great you are. If you're simply being quiet in a conversation because you're waiting for an opportunity to talk again... you're doing conversations wrong. Make sure you take notice about that they have to say and enquire more about the points that they make. This will help build a reputation as someone who doesn't talk at you but talks with you.

Be generous. Doing people favours will often mean they will return in kind! Relationships are a two-way street and you can't expect someone to read over a chapter or provide you with guidance without something in return.

Don't focus upwards. Some people's method of networking is to solely try and schmooze in with the well-known actors in your field. However, it's often your peers who will be experiencing the same lived experience as you and will have the most relevant bits of advice. Furthermore, people can often build more authentic networks with people who are like them – either studying in the same area or are at the same stages of their career.

Follow up. Have a plan to follow up on questions or somebody's research. That means getting their contact details (be it an email or a social account) and making sure to get back to them! Once you've made that connection, make sure to stay in touch.



ECRs in a Covid-19 World

Since the onset of the pandemic, the landscape for ECRs has radically changed.

While we would like to maintain some optimism, faith in an imminent 'return to normal' has not served anyone well up to this point and ECRs may benefit from acknowledging the sustained nature of these challenges. This doesn't cover everything - but the 2 main challenges we think ECRs face are:

Hiring, job security and career progression.

Dire warnings about the job market have been a staple of the ECR experience as long as we can remember - often to motivate more than to describe reality. But Covid-19 has, over Spring/Summer 2020, **reduced academic recruitment**, and despite some recovery hiring has **not returned to 2019 levels**.

Worse, some ECRs (largely those with teaching contracts) **lost** existing rolling contracts unexpectedly, as teaching loads were pushed onto permanent staff. As student numbers have **held up better** than sectoral expectations for 2020-1, hiring has improved but largely on casualised contracts. Within departments, ECRs may find themselves in high demand owing to their skills as 'digital natives' but this may not always translate into appropriate recognition in terms of pay and progression.

Frankly, this situation is largely out of ECR control - the future depends on the path of the pandemic, government and sectoral decisions, and to some extent on solidary actions by permanent staff. ECRs have started **bottom-up campaigns**, and the more of us participate the greater pressure will build for job security.

As individuals, we should be generous with ourselves, resisting the belief that career setbacks occur because we're 'not good enough' and recognising the wider issues at hand.

Physical isolation, and the loss of mentors and networks. ECRs have always relied on mentorship/networks to navigate the various challenges of academic life, be they publishing, teaching or obtaining grants. These networks would usually centre on their departments and the physical spaces we took for granted: break rooms, cafeterias and so on. Yet for the time being, this kind of in-person interaction is quite rightly off the cards.

But physical isolation doesn't have to mean isolation from your academic community. Within departments and research groups/clusters, Slack and Teams channels have flowered as ways to share advice, gripes and silly memes helping everyone get through it. ECRs themselves have created virtual spaces crossing universities and even countries, linking people with similar research interests and challenges. For example, one ECR set up a [Zoom seminar series](#) for ECR presenters, and more recently a [Slack group](#) has sprung up and become an active and supportive community. And following the [ECN's Twitter](#) is a great reminder that you're not alone – just don't spend too much time procrastinating on social media!

We hope that these valuable services can be maintained and furthered - what can you do to help?



Teaching & Learning in Higher Education

Whilst teaching your first class can often feel slightly nerve-wracking, gaining the skills and experiences of a trained educator are a critical component of the modern academic.

Departments will often help support you in the initial stages of training to be an educator in Higher Education (such as the Associate Fellowship of Advance HE) with classes on a broad spectrum of teaching and learning skills. If you aspire towards a career in the University sector you should consider, where appropriate, using your time as a PhD to gain the experiences as an educator through running seminar groups for your supervisors and delivering guest lectures on your subject.

Teaching and learning have been fundamentally changed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Whereas before teaching and learning were primarily face to face experiences, Covid has precipitated a fundamental change towards more hybrid online and face-to-face approaches.

This is both an challenge and opportunity for ECRs; a challenge to innovate in a new and exciting medium for delivering taught content and facilitating group learning and an opportunity to position yourselves at the leading-edge of a new era of digitally-oriented teaching and learning in HE.

The PSA ECN are committed to supporting the needs and aspirations for ECR political scientists as educators in this new era of blended teaching and learning. Along with our colleagues at the [PSA Teaching and Learning Network](#) we strive to help ECRs get the training and skills they need to become pedagogical innovators and excellent educators. The T&L network run regular events and workshops and as a member of the PSA ECN you can expect to hear about specialist ECN T&L content and workshops in the near future.

All Teaching and Learning webinars are available to [watch online](#).



The UK University Landscape

The United Kingdom (UK) has one of the most globally important and competitive Higher Education sectors.

The United Kingdom (UK) has one of the most globally important and competitive Higher Education sectors. The most recent (2020) Times Higher Education World Rankings has four UK universities in its global top twenty and there are over 100 higher education institutions in the UK with more than eighty institutions with Politics departments representing a broad sweep of sub-disciplinary and interdisciplinary interests. The UK is an exciting and dynamic space for early career political scientists, and the PSA ECN exists to support and champion the interests of this early career community.

The ECN is a unique feature of the UK higher education early career landscape. No other academic learned society in the UK has a dedicated team committed to advancing the interests of our early career members.

One of the key functions of the ECN is to support early career political scientists' understanding of the complex and sometimes confusing landscape of UK higher education and academic careers. To support this we run an annual series of events exploring key aspects of UK higher education, including the Research Excellence Framework, the Teaching Excellence Framework, Research impact and UK academic careers.

The ECN are always looking for opportunities to expand our reach within departments, so if you feel your department isn't adequately engaged with the ECN we would love to hear from you by emailing ecn@psa.ac.uk.



Achieving Research Impact

It's increasingly important to demonstrate that your research can, in one way or another, achieve some degree of 'impact'.

But in our experience, it's best not to think of this just as something funders and future employers want from you - rather, it can be a fulfilling exercise in its own right. After all, you probably didn't get into academia to live in a bubble. Over time, expectations of impact will increase, so although there's no need to stress, it can be best to plan ahead. Some thesis projects can even be planned with 'impact' in mind.

There are many things that (formally, and informally) count as impact. Many Politics PhDs are funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), who helpfully **define** impact and **classify** project outputs.

Academic Impact is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes in shifting understanding and advancing scientific

method, theory and application across and within disciplines.

Economic and Societal Impact is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes to society and the economy, and its benefits to individuals, organisations and/or nations.

[Check out the ESRC Impact Toolkit.](#)

'Engagement' will be the most common and accessible route to impact, and we've put together a handy [video](#) on using blogs and the media to share research with more general audiences. The PSA also values ECR contributions to its blog - see [our guidance](#).

Getting in non-academic publications as an ECR



Engagement can also mean communicating with select audiences, such as policymakers and activist groups. Some PhDs could even aim to influence policy, practice or service provision. In Westminster, this could mean giving evidence for a [Select Committee enquiry](#), and other governments and organisations locally and internationally will have their own ways in. Be on the lookout, and find out if there's anyone you know who can help you make connections. If you can get enough people interested, think about setting up a workshop - a highly credible 'impact' in the view of research councils.

A common, but wrong, belief is that the only thing that counts is 'non-academic' impact. Especially if your main contribution is conceptual or methodological, and mainly of interest to other academics, impact of this kind can feel hard to achieve. But actually, impact could involve things like sharing research data, or creating a statistical package to implement a method - especially if you can prove that what you've developed is well-used by a research community.

Moving Forward...

Annual Progression, Submission, and your Viva

A PhD is a marathon, not a sprint. Nonetheless, as time goes on, you will encounter more and more ‘crunch moments’ which will put your work to the test. Depending on your institutional policies, these can begin quite early on with mid-year review meetings, where you might be expected to share a redrafted thesis proposal and/or a draft thesis chapter with your supervisors. In your first year, this can be a good time for a ‘big picture’ discussion about your overall plan - rather than getting into the weeds of method or findings.

Annual ‘progression’ meetings can cause more anxiety, both for their formal role in allowing a PhD to progress and because you will have to share your work with another academic in your department (and you won’t always get to handpick the most sympathetic person). These do need to be taken seriously, but major progression issues rarely arise from these meetings - if this outcome was likely, your supervisor would likely have already warned you.

These meetings have two key benefits for PhDs, detailed feedback and offering a taste of the viva experience (though a tough progression doesn’t mean your viva would be the same!)

At the end of your journey, we come to submission and the viva. It’s worth familiarising yourself early with your university’s thesis submission policies and standards (such as the word count) in order to write around these rather than adapt at the last minute. And as far off as the viva might be, it can be useful to learn what kinds of questions examiners will ask - after all, you will want to answer most of these in the thesis text itself!

But much of what you do naturally on a PhD will prepare you for a viva, often without your even knowing it. Conferences and workshops - alongside your progression meetings - are a great opportunity to concisely discuss your research, to get used to oral argument, and to learn about how people see the strengths and weaknesses of your work.

Moreover, the viva - much more than the thesis text - is a place to discuss your research journey, warts and all. Every time you reach a stumbling block during your PhD, remind yourself that you're exploring different possibilities that you'll be able to talk about later, and make sure you can give a credible account of your changes of direction.

Ultimately, though, examiners accepted the request because they are interested, probably sympathetic and they want you to pass - for this reason, vivas are often far less stressful than they're often cracked up to be. Many say they enjoy their viva - strange as it may sound now! - and not just for the champagne they get afterwards...



<https://xkcd.com/1403/>



Career Advice

The majority of ECRs will want to use their 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. 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.

ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE TODAY!

Most of our advice will help you tomorrow, but what can you do today?

We hope you've found the 2020-2021 guide to undertaking your PhD useful. But what are some things you can do, today, to get you started?

Here are our top five actions you can do right now:

- **Become part of the PSA and ECN communities.** That means signing up at the discounted £20 a year rate if you haven't already! (If you have, why don't you share it with your peers?)
- **Say hello to us on social media!** You can join our [Facebook group](#), follow us on Twitter on both the [@PSA_ECN](#) and [@PolStudiesAssoc](#) accounts. We often promote our members and their work through these channels.
- **Look though the PSA specialist groups.** Other than the ECN, the PSA also has specialist groups on a range of political disciplines which could be relevant to your research, all of them are friendly to PhD students – [so why not check them out?](#)
- **Write down and plan your working hours.** Remember your PhD is a marathon, not a sprint. Remember to put breaks and time off for well-being in there too.
- **With a coffee, enjoy an episode of the [ECN Backbenchers](#) or check out content** from our last virtual conference on our channel

