

LPS doctoral researchers discuss professional development at 'virtual' away day

Every June and July for the past seven years, PhD students in the School of Law, Politics and Sociology (LPS) have taken part in an annual away day sponsored by the Sussex Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) doctoral training centre. In previous years, away days were held at Stanmer House and the Brighton and Hove Albion stadium, as well as the University's own Bramber House conference centre.

This year's away day was due to be held at the end of June at the Brighthelm Centre but unfortunately had to be cancelled due to government lockdown restrictions. However, the School decided that it would hold a 'virtual' away day instead, with three online professional development workshops focusing on the themes selected by doctoral researchers themselves for the original in-person event: getting published, careers, and improving the PhD experience. In total, more than 40 PhD researchers participated in the July 'virtual' away day sessions.

The first workshop was on the perennial topic of 'Getting published'. Sociology lecturer Dr Kathryn Telling gave a presentation on how to get articles published in academic journals, while Law lecturer Dr Helen Dancer providing tips on turning a PhD thesis into a monograph. Dr Telling talked about the importance of holding discussions as soon as possible in the doctoral research process with supervisors on how sections of a thesis could be turned into journal articles. Dr Dancer, on the other hand, said that, while trying to find a publisher at the same time as completing the PhD was certainly an option, this needed to be balanced against prioritising getting sections of the thesis published as journal articles. She said that she actually waited until after her viva and then modified the thesis make it more 'publisher-friendly'. Finally, Politics lecturer Dr Sam Power drew on his own extensive experience of very successful public engagement in the field of corruption studies to provide some excellent tips on how to communicate research to non-academic audiences, particularly through online publications such as blogs.

The second workshop was on 'Careers for postgraduate researchers in difficult times'. Helen Gorman from the Sussex Careers and Employability Centre explained how her colleagues continued to provide support for PhDs during the lockdown, and outlined how doctoral researchers can market their research and organisational skills when applying for non-academic jobs. Politics lecturer Dr Neil Dooley and Dr Ben Fincham, a reader in Sociology, then drew upon the own personal experiences as, respectively, a relatively early career researcher and more experienced scholar to provide many helpful tips about how doctoral researchers can improve their chances of finding employment in the increasingly competitive academic jobs market. The over-arching theme was that, although competition for jobs was particularly tough at the moment, securing a first lectureship appointment was always the most challenging part of an academic career. All the professional development tasks that they needed to undertake anyway - securing publications, acquiring teaching experience, being flexible and willing to take on new challenges (and sometimes volunteer for less exciting teaching and administrative responsibilities!) - still applied. They also stressed the importance of 'doing homework' on the University and department where they were applying to.

The third workshop focused on the theme of 'Improving the PhD experience' and was led off by Sociology PGR convenor Dr Aneira Edmunds, Head of the Politics Department Prof Dan Hough and Law PGR convenor Prof Nuno Ferreira. With a wealth of experience in both doctoral supervision and overseeing PGR matters within their departments, the three scholars

shared personal reflections and tips on best practice covering a very wide range of issues relating to the PhD journey. They focused particularly on how doctoral researchers could manage relations with their supervisors more effectively by, for example: being open and honest, managing mutual expectations, and, where appropriate, 'taking back control' of the supervision process. Prof Ferreira also discussed a range of issues and concerns raised by Law PGRs in the recent progression review process. One of these was the importance of PhD students networking and being embedded within broader research communities both at Sussex and beyond, something that all three speakers stressed. This was recognised as a particular challenge at a time when nearly all academic research events were taking place online rather than in-person.

Summing up the workshops, LPS Director of Doctoral Studies and Professor of Politics Aleks Szczerbiak said:

'It was a great shame that our in-person away day had to be cancelled and there is no obviously no substitute for the face-to-face discussions and invaluable side-conversations that take place at such events (not to mention the food!). But I am delighted that both LPS faculty and doctoral researchers, and colleagues from other parts of the University, were so willing to come forward and make the on-line workshops such a success. One up-side was that several PhD researchers who would not have been able to make it down to Brighton for an in-person away day could attend. We will certainly continue with these kind of online professional development events, alongside normal in-person ones, in the future.'

'Two key themes that emerged from the sessions were: 'start early' and 'get help'. It is important to start all of these professional development tasks as soon as possible in order for doctoral researchers to make themselves as employable as possible in what is a very tough academic and non-academic jobs market. In LPS and at Sussex more broadly we put a lot of effort into helping our PhDs prepare to meet these challenges. We are also very fortunate that there are plenty of resources to help our doctoral researchers in all of these areas from faculty, fellow PhDs, and other colleagues within the University working in services such as the Careers and Employability Centre and the Doctoral School.'