

Interview with RSA territorial representative at Northumbria University (UK), Nick Gray



Nick Gray is a doctoral Researcher, part-time Research Associate and occasional tutor at Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University. Prior to joining Northumbria, he spent several years working in public policy, principally as a Policy Advisor at Newcastle City Council but also in the NHS and charity sector. Outside of public policy he worked in the private sector dealing with complaints for Ikea UK where he was able to hone his listening skills while patiently attending to tales of faulty sofas.



Why did you decide to join the RSA, what do you bring to the role of territorial representative?

My first contact with the RSA was helping hand-out conference bags and point people towards coffee at the 2011 annual conference in Newcastle - I was still working in local government and, keen to maintain good relations with our friends at CURDS, we'd offered part of our building to host the conference. In return I was able to attend some of the sessions where I remember feeling a bit intimidated (not much has changed there). A few years later when I took the opportunity to sign up for a PhD, I joined straight away with the encouragement of my supervisor Lee Pugalis - a keen, active member. As a territorial representative I bring my years of experience in practical politics and policy development - something that I hope helps me promote engagement between university based researchers and other regional institutions.

What are your research interests?

In local government I worked on welfare policy, employment and social inclusion but having spent a long time immersed in the regional politics and economic development policies of North East England, noted in a competitive field for not always being the most serene or functional, UK regional policy tops my list of research interests. Specifically I'm interested in the notions of place-based development and their potential and applicability in England, although when friends ask I tend to explain it in lay-terms as "northern powerhouse, devolution and all that".

What challenges and opportunities are faced by early career researchers in your area?

The generic opportunities are pretty clear - the field is new and exciting to me and, as many people say, very early career PhD researchers have more time than most to devote to research. A specific challenge for me as a returner to academia has been attempting to catch up with academic literature when coming out of a different job rather than several years of taught programmes. In terms of career progression and opportunities, I think the way that the UK government chooses to performance-manage university research output (the Research Excellence Framework) offers little incentive for universities to give weight to previous work experience when recruiting - this is definitely a challenge and one that other

older “career switchers” have confirmed.

Can you tell us something interesting about yourself?

My “tell us something interesting about yourself” icebreaker when I teach undergraduates is generally that I’ve never eaten at McDonalds - they find this astonishing. If I was writing not so long ago I could probably find something rather more interesting to say about myself (travel, music or whatnot), but having two small noisy boys has made me more boring than I used to be and Lego is more a feature of my weekends than late nights.