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ARTICLE

Past, present, future: The RGS-IBG political geography research group within British political geography

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the history of the Political Geography Research Group (PolGRG) of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) within the shifting landscape of political geography as a sub-discipline within British academic geography. While the sub-discipline has evolved almost beyond recognition in the past 50 years, from the rehabilitation of political geography and geopolitics in the 1960s through the political turn to the present, what has been the role of the flagship national study group in this journey? Reflecting on this question provides an opportunity to consider how the RGS-IBG research group has previously and can continue to contribute to and advance the (re)birth of British political geography while reflecting more broadly on the growing challenges to research groups—which rely upon volunteers undertaking 'service roles' for the benefit of the discipline—in the face of increasing workload pressures in the sector.

KEYWORDS

history of the discipline, political geography, political turn, professional service, research group, Royal Geographical Society

1 | INTRODUCTION

Anxieties about the health of (British) political geography resurface periodically: from Brian Berry's (1969) 'moribund backwater' description to Antonsich et al.'s (2009) retrospective collection (see also Johnston, 2001; Kofman, 2003). Such reflections have considered the nature of geographical knowledge, links to empire and the imperatives of decolonisation, concerns with social justice and sustainability (Johnston, 1998), as well as concerns with an 'inability [of political geography] to clearly define its core subject matter and its disciplinary boundaries' (Antonsich et al., 2009, p. 388). Some may view these engagements in a more cynical light, viewing the historiography of geography as 'display[ing] a continued disciplinary parochialism', telling 'stories about what it is that geographers should do' to other geographers as a set of 'self-confirming narratives of legitimization' (Barnett, 1995, p. 418). Barnett argues that a more critical engagement should focus on the present institutional and structural determinants of the current state

of the discipline rather than the past. Nonetheless, to borrow George Santanya's famous line, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it': the current landscape of the (sub)discipline is shaped by both contemporary forces and historical influences (on the unequal landscape of geographical knowledge production in South Africa see Hammett et al., 2024).

It is in this spirit that this paper proceeds, reflecting on the history of political geography in the UK (which remains relatively unexplored) and the role of the Political Geography Research Group (PolGRG) of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) therein.[1] In so doing, this paper seeks to contribute to the British 'geographical archive' (Withers, 2002) while reflecting on the role of the RGS-IBG research groups in the academic landscape. It is assumed these groups are key to disciplinary development and identity, providing spaces to support (early career) researchers, build networks, and foster intellectual development. However, increasing managerialism, metricisation, precarity and the neoliberal trend within academia suggest a need to critically reflect on the viability of the currently voluntarist approach—reliant goodwill and un-work-loaded 'service' activity—in the face of these pressures. The paper thus sets out to do three things. Firstly, to (partially) document the history of the PolGRG and reflect on its role in the sub-discipline. Secondly, to celebrate what has been done considering shifting challenges and limitations and to think critically about what should be expected of the research group amidst a changing academic landscape. Thirdly, to think about the future sustainability of the current RGS-IBG research group model and having some difficult conversations about their role within the sector and (sub)discipline with resonance to broader debates on (in)equalities in and sustainability of workloads and knowledge production across (inter)national academic landscapes (e.g., Hammett et al., 2024).

Founded in 1830, the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) was a populist organisation focused on exploration and discovery for the 'advancement of geographical science' (Gardner & Lambert, 2006, p. 160) and lobbied for geography to be recognised as a mainstream scholarly discipline in the early twentieth century (Sidaway & Johnston, 2007). Established a century later in 1933, the Institute of British Geographers (IBG) was a smaller academic society (1650 members compared with the RGS' 11,457 members; Powell, 2015; Richards & Wrigley, 1996). A highly controversial merger in 1995 was contested by many IBG members who opposed the RGS' populist approach, colonial links and sponsorship agreements with companies including Shell. Despite resultant rifts and resignations of membership, IBG/RGS-IBG study/research groups continued to provide networks and support for researchers through mentoring, funding, conference session and workshop organisation, and other activities. As a consequence of the merger, the Political Geography Study Group (PolGSG) morphed into the Political Geography Research Group (PolGRG) in late 1996/early 1997.

This paper is informed by a review of study/research group reports and updates, RGS archives, published academic reviews, and interviews with former PolGRG committee members. Twenty invitations were sent to former PolGRG committee members identified from RGS archives, resulting in nine online hour-long interviews (Table 1) between April and September 2023. Interviewees were invited to provide autobiographical reflections on their 'journeys' to involvement with the research group, experiences on the PolGRG committee, and perspectives on the role of the PolGRG in the evolution of political geography in the UK (Johnston, 2019). My longstanding membership of and recent role as Chair of PolGRG undoubtedly assisted in securing interviews, but also provides a partial framing to the analysis and discussion presented.

TABLE 1 Interviewees (and author) and dates of Political Geography Study Group (PolGSG)/ the Political Geography Research Group (PolGRG) committee involvement.

	Chair dates	Other committee dates
Mark Goodwin	1994–2001	2001–2003
Mike Woods	2001–2006	1997
Martin Jones	N/A	2001–2006
Mark Whitehead	N/A	2002–2010
David Atkinson	2006–2008	1995–2006
Joe Painter	2011–2013	1991–1994
Nick Gill	N/A	2011–2013
Adam Ramadan	2013–2016, 2019–2020	2011–2013
Sara Fregonese	2016–2019	2013–2016
Daniel Hammett	2020–2023	2008–2014, 2018–2020

2 | THE (RE)BIRTH OF POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY IN THE UK

While political geography scholarship in post-World War II Britain was largely absent (Johnston, 2001; Powell, 2015), an emerging profile was evident in papers submitted to key Anglophone journals (*Annals, Transactions, Geographical Journal, Geographical Review, Economic Geography*), although these were 'obsess[ed] with antecedents and ancients that made it appear a scholarly dinosaur' (Powell, 2015, p. 596; also Jackson et al., 2006). Crucially, the inclusion of political geography as one of eight human geography sub-disciplines in the UK Social Science Research Council's (SSRC)[2] 1967 funding remit (Johnston, 2004) and a turn to spatial analysis and the concept of territoriality re-energised the field (Johnston, 2001). This optimism was, however, tempered by the relocation of several key British political geographers to the USA (Johnston, 1998; Sidaway & Johnston, 2007) and political geography's absence from reviews of university geography during the 1970s (Cooke & Robson, 1976; Lawton, 1978). While an expansion in work on electoral geographies, world-systems approaches, and critical geopolitics eventually signalled a revival of British political geography coalesced around the spatial and territorial turn in the late 1970s (Johnston, 2001), more critical reviews have argued that political geography 'missed the boat' of the quantitative revolution and of emerging critical engagements with gender, race and social movements (Antonsich et al., 2009).

Overlooked again in the 1980 review (Doornkamp & Warren, 1980), political geography was noted as an expanding field in the 1984 review (Munton & Goudie, 1984), driven by Marxist and radical geographers such as David Harvey, and SSRC funding for six political geography PhD studentships. The establishing of *Political Geography Quarterly* in 1982 by Peter Taylor (Newcastle University, UK) and John O'Loughlin (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA) (O'Loughlin, 2018), and the publication of Peter Taylor's (1985) seminal *Political Geography: World-Economy, Nation-State, and Locality* textbook further strengthened the profile of British political geography. Over the coming years, British political geography expanded in profile with a primary focus on elections, the state and geopolitics (Bennett & Thornes, 1988). The formation of the Political Geography Working Group (PolGWG)—later Study Group (PolGSG)—of the IBG in 1977 offered new opportunities for the development of the political geography community.

3 | THE EARLY YEARS: THE POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY WORKING/STUDY GROUP

The PolGWG's opening mandate was 'to further research and education in political geography' (Political Geography Working Group Constitution, 1977, p. 1) with activities concentrated on organising IBG conference sessions (Muir, 1979). Initial committee members Neville Douglas (Belfast), Mark Wise (Plymouth Polytechnic), Alan Burnett (Portsmouth Polytechnic), Tony Budd (Leicester), and Richard Muir (CCAT Cambridge) sought to support the sub-discipline in the UK and to 'maintain and strengthen the contact with American [political] geographers' (Douglas, 1980, p. 93). A subsequent Anglo-American seminar was published as *Political Studies from Spatial Perspectives: Anglo-American Essays on Political Geography* (Burnett & Taylor, 1981), and sessions followed at the IBG Annual Conference (Burnett, 1982).

Contributions to IBG conferences and resultant publications (Burnett & Taylor, 1981; Cook, 1982; Jenkins & McEvoy, 1977), a growing membership (from 49 in 1978 to 61 in 1981), and successes in 'publicis[ing] research in political geography and ... promot[ing] the increased importance of the sub-discipline' (Anon, 1982) led to an application for Study Group status in 1982. This status was conferred in 1983, and the PolGSG (initial membership 43) consolidated formal links with the Political Geography Speciality Group of the AAG and the UK Political Studies Association (Cook, 1983). As the PolGSG membership expanded (to 61 in 1984 [Cook, 1984] and 86 in 1985 [Mohan, 1985]), the 'potential re-birth' of the subdiscipline was cautiously celebrated in 1984 by then IBG President, John House (Powell, 2015, p. 598).

During these nascent years, the PolGSG focused on organising IBG conference sessions, producing annual newsletters, and supporting additional events to build a scholarly community. Conference sessions in the 1980s addressed a variety of topical interests (some resulting in influential publications, e.g., Williams & Kofman, 1989) and engaged with global developments within the field (Paddison, 1988). Strategic efforts to broaden the group's research and teaching focus through an internationalist ethos (Kofman, 1989) resulted in two Franco-British conferences (Liverpool, 1989, and Nantes, 1991), a strong geographical diversity of papers at the 1990 IBG conference (papers on the West Bank, Mozambique, Guinea, China and Israel) and an impressive international membership of the group (including scholars based in Canada, South Africa, the USA, West Germany, Israel and Australia).

The growing profile of the PolGSG, and British political geography overall, reflected the popularity of the Marxist turn, engagements with the state, global systems, globalisation, and critical responses to Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal

economic policies (Gardner & Hay, 1992). Nonetheless, concerns persisted that British political geography 'was staid and failing to keep up with new innovations and approaches'(Mark Goodwin, 12 May 2023). These 'missed' innovations were seem as including emergent theoretical areas (including feminist [political] geography), new methodological approaches, and topical areas focused on the everyday. PolGSG committee members at the time were concerned with a dominance of political geography discussion—particularly at the IBG conference—by mid and senior career academics. This dominance, it was felt, resulted in 'limited ways of thinking about the discipline … it felt much more parochial and hide-bound by a kind of traditional sense of what geography had been … it just felt like a quite Beige-tweedy kind of little world' (David Atkinson, 22 May 2023). Responding to this concern, committee members focused efforts on expanding the group's membership and organising additional events to 'reflect the views of the new generation of political geographers' and capitalise on 'the vibrancy of the subdiscipline' among a new generation of scholars (Mark Goodwin, 12 May 2023).

This vibrancy was evident in the PolGSG's sponsorship of UK- and international-focused IBG conference sessions and events throughout the 1990s, with a growing focus on Europe, citizenship and (urban) governance. Various influential publications resulted from these activities: the 1993 'Spaces of Citizenship' IBG conference session became a special issue of *Political Geography* (1995), while the *New Theoretical Directions in Political Geography* PolGSG workshop resulted in a *GeoForum* special issue. Continued efforts to expand the influence of the sub-discipline included inter-disciplinary events such as the 1994 workshop on 'Global Politics: setting agendas for the year 2000' (Pinch, 1994). These efforts were aided by the increasing prominence of political geography in both teaching and research, and the launch of *Geopolitics and International Boundaries* (later *Geopolitics*) 1996 by Richard Schofield (School of Oriental and African Studies, London). Despite this broader rejuvenation, political geography was again absent from Richards and Wrigley's (1996) disciplinary review, which instead addressed the cultural turn, structural challenges in higher education (increasing teaching loads, reductions in per-student income, the introduction of teaching and research quality assessments), the RGS-IBG merger (which led to particularly bitter divisions within the PolGSG and a number of resignations among members of the group; Mark Goodwin, 12 May 2023), and five selected thematic areas of theoretical debate within human geography (cultural turn; economic geography; people and environment; health and development; GIS and quantitative human geography).

Nonetheless, Thrift and Walling's (2000, p. 108) disciplinary review emphasised political geography's key contributions to ethical and global agendas through geopolitical engagements with 'the construction and wielding of discursive power'. The 'critical geopolitics' turn of the 1990s meant political geography gained prominence as an 'important way of looking at the world and engaging interdisciplinary debates' (Mark Whitehead, 7 June 2023), with the PolGSG supporting workshops on 'Geopolitical reconstruction and the New World Order' and 'New perspectives on post-Soviet geographies' in 1995. However, the resultant 'political turn' which saw a broad diffusion of political discussion and consideration across the discipline as a whole 'challeng[ed] the very existence of a discipline called political geography' (Antonsich et al., 2009, p. 389) and called into question the need for a specific sub-discipline given the much expanded understanding of politics and increased intersection with other sub-disciplinary fields (see Jones et al., 2015). These developments, however, laid the foundations for a subsequent expansion in theoretical frameworks and methodological techniques, which further reinvigorated political geography—alongside continued concerns with how to define the identify and focus of the sub-discipline (Jones et al., 2015).

In parallel to these developments, there were growing critical engagements with the masculinity of the field and privileging of Politics (Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Kofman & Peake, 1990) and calls to engage with gendered political geographies and politics at multiple scales. However, while a powerful and extensive body of feminist political geography work rapidly emerged, experiences of marginalisation and gatekeeping meant many of these scholars found greater affinity with and self-identified as working in other sub-disciplinary areas (Brown & Staeheli, 2003; Hyndman, 2001; Kofman, 2004; Sharp, 2007; Staeheli, 2001; Staeheli & Kofman, 2004). These dynamics, alongside concerns that by the late 1990s the PolGSG 'wasn't really a massively active group' and 'was a bit just stuffy' (Martin Jones, 28 June 2023), meant committee members felt 'it needed a bit of invigoration' (Mike Woods, 15 September 2023).

4 | CONSOLIDATING (CRITICAL) BRITISH POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES

This invigoration saw the now renamed PolGRG (rebranded from PolGSG in late 1996/early 1997 due to the merger of the IBG and RGS) sponsored conference sessions frequently including influential scholars whose work had a political angle and resulting in key publications (e.g., Barnett & Low, 2004; Philo & Smith, 2003) and a diverse array of foci. During this period, key themes addressed in these sessions included globalisation, citizenship, borders, governance, power, technology, urban politics, rights, surveillance, social (in)justice, terror, emotions and EU crises. This breadth simultaneously

signals a key challenge for the PolGRG: how (and whether) to cohere around a core identity or intellectual agenda of 'political geography' without risking the sub-discipline becoming—to borrow David Atkinson's phrase from earlier—'parochial and hide-bound'? While debates on what constituted 'political geography' continued, there was a growing willingness to understand the sub-discipline as a discursive—and thus ever-changing and malleable—construct (see Painter & Jeffrey, 2009). Rather, the PolGRG committee of the 2000s sought to 'broaden the appeal of the research group ... [placing an] emphasis on early career researchers' and efforts to diversity the committee, tackle gatekeeping practices associated with established theoretical approaches, and to promote a community building agenda (Mark Whitehead, 7 June 2023).

These community building efforts remain vital to PolGRG. In the early years, the committee comprised a small number of (male) colleagues, primarily based at new, rather than Russell Group, universities.[3] Over the intervening years, the diversity of committee members and institutional affiliations has diversified, with particular institutions prominent at various times (for example, Aberystwyth University, Royal Holloway University of London). Nonetheless, personal networks and connections—not least colleagues, mentors, and supervisors—remain integral in encouraging students or colleagues to join research group activities and to stand for committee roles (Nick Gill, 30 June 2023). Mark Whitehead's (7 June 2023) engagement with the committee arose through 'this kind of familial kind of connection through supervisors and colleagues'—a process particularly central to the prominence of Aberystwyth-based scholars on PolGRG committee in the early 2000s. As Mike Woods (15 September 2023) articulates, this reflected a strategic departmental decision: 'We positioned ourselves to do political geography, and as part of that there was departmental level ambition to be a leading place for political geography ... [which] led us into being involved in the political research group as a way of making Aberystwyth prominent within the political geography community in Britain'. Consequently, a succession of Aberystwyth-based political geographers took on key committee roles during the 2000s.

Simultaneously, Mike Woods (15 September 2023) explains, the PolGRG committee actively sought to 'broaden the scope of political geography' and bolster its prominence through 'encouraging a broader range of sessions at the RGS conference and ... proposing plenary speakers [for the RGS-IBG conference]'. These efforts sought to speak to an expanded array of central concerns within geography, and included support for events that broadened political geography conversations—such as the 2005 Alternative Economic Spaces/New Political Spaces conference in Hull, or the 2008 conference at Durham University focused on calls for 'critical geopolitics' to challenge the narrow Anglo-American world-view of the sub-discipline (Power, 2010; also O'Loughlin, 2018). These efforts and events certainly raised the profile of the sub-discipline and research group, despite the smaller number of members (and lower subvention and other income) than certain of the larger groups such as the Economic Geography or Social and Cultural Geography groups. Across the intervening years, PolGRG has continued to support biennial workshops and other events addressing a raft of themes, including *Practising Political Geography* (2009, UCL), *Why Political Geographies Matter* (2011, Newcastle), *Doing Political Geography* (2012, Exeter), *Regenerating Political Geography* (2015, Birmingham), *Fieldwork in Political Geography* (2017, RHUL), *The Spatial Politics of Solidarity and Transnationalism* (2019, Glasgow), *Inequalities of Knowledge Production in Political Geography* (2021, Online), and *Political Geography: Past, Present, Future* (2023, Sheffield).

Alongside these events, PolGRG has sought to strengthen the profile and community of British political geography through multiple endeavours. While some initiatives have never materialised (e.g., a mooted online political geography journal discussed at the 2002 AGM), others have become staple components of the work of the PolGRG: since its launch in 2005, the PolGRG dissertation prize has gained an increasing profile and numbers of submissions (although these have been dominated by current Russell Group universities despite efforts to encourage a greater diversity of submissions).[4] Other initiatives have included the annual 'Emerging Voices' PolGRG-sponsored conference session, the 2017 nomination (with the Gender and Feminist Geography Research Group) of Lindsey Hilsum (foreign correspondent with Channel 4) for the Patron's medal, and a co-hosted (with the Economic Geography Research Group) workshop titled *Brexit: A Geographical Conversation*. Overall, these efforts and innovations reflected a deliberate effort to make 'the group visible within the RGS landscape in a way that it was perhaps less so before' (Sara Fregonese, 5 May 2023). More recently, the PolGRG committee have contributed to changes within the RGS, including the renewal and development of policies and training relating to harassment and bullying, and co-leading on the newly established cross-research group peer-mentoring scheme. Meanwhile, connections with editors of the *Political Geography* journal have led to a number of collaborative endeavours in recent years—including sponsorship of the biennial PolGRG book prize from its launch in 2017.[5] At times, these connections have been contentious with Elsevier's (*Political Geography*'s publisher) role in the arms trade resulting in an academic boycott and refusals by the PolGRG committee to sponsor the *Political Geography* plenary lecture (AGM Minutes, 2007) and of the journal's offer to sponsor the PolGRG dissertation prize (AGM Minutes, 2012).

5 | THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE PolGRG IN BRITISH POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

The expansion in the sub-discipline of political geography and profile of PolGRG—which now has a diverse membership of c. 250–300—has been aided by the rise of 'critical geography' over recent decades which has mainstreamed 'the political' into human geography. The past decade has witnessed something of a 'coming of age' of political geography: the 2013 international benchmarking review of political geography in the UK raised concerns with a skewed generational distribution of scholars, limited international field research, and the risk of British political geography being relatively parochial (2013, section 2.3, see https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301677336_International_Benchmarking_Review_for_United_Kingdom_Human_Geography)—a decade later, the sub-discipline is benefitting from a consolidation of early, mid- and senior-career scholars with increasingly diverse research engagements. While the PolGRG may not have been 'igniting the call to the discipline—it was like a bit of an intellectual sideshow rather being the catalyst in the middle' (Martin Jones, 28 June 2023), it 'has definitely had an influence, [although] political geography in Britain would have probably developed pretty well without the research group' (Joe Painter, 18 April 2023). The crucial question then is whether the PolGRG could (or should) have done more to steer or drive the development of the sub-discipline—and, linked to this, whether it should seek to take on this role moving forwards?

There are two key concerns at play here. The first is the risk of not learning from the past. It is clear from the narratives of previous committee members, and reviews of the field, that efforts to define the field of political geography in a particular way risks excluding or marginalising both scholars and innovative ideas. In recent years, there has been an acceptance that political geography is a broad field such that we might think that 'everything is political geography' (Mark Whitehead) and 'everybody's doing political geography, but do not necessarily call it that' (Nick Gill, 30 June 2023). Thus, rather than obsess on what is (and is not) political geography, if we accept that political geography is a discursive construct which is continual re-imagined and redefined (Jones et al., 2015; Painter & Jeffrey, 2009), a more ambitious and progressive approach would instead be to encourage scholars to think more expansively about how political geography/ers could contribute to and inform key debates and agendas—not only within (human) geography overall, but in relation to major global challenges and questions. There is a clear role of the PolGRG in continuing to support a broad and supportive engagement with political geography through existing activities—and while there may be potential for further support, this relies upon the goodwill and 'service' work of PolGRG Committee members: which leads to the second concern.

Capacity: What is the capacity of the PolGRG—or any other of the RGS-IBG research groups to support or lead developments within their field? What is it reasonable to ask of a committee—many of whom are early (or earlier) career academics, who undertake these roles on a voluntary basis and in addition to their contracted workload? At times, the interviewed PolGRG committee have (unfairly) benchmarked the activities of the group against those of much larger and better resourced groups (for instance, Social and Cultural Geography or Economic Geography), leading to a perception that the group has not been active enough. Given the size of the group, this seems to be unreasonably self-deprecating. More pertinently, perhaps, are concerns with already-existing challenges that are likely to become increasingly profound given the growing pressures of academic life—namely struggles to secure quorate attendance at AGMs (although less of an issue now with online AGMs it seems), to fill committee roles, and for volunteers to run the biennial workshop. Thus, the question here is really, in an increasingly pressurised working environment, what can—and should—we expect from RGS-IBG research groups?

Broader changes in the higher education sector that mean academic workloads are increasingly pressurised (Smith, 2024) and committee roles (a service duty for the benefit of the discipline which is an unpaid additional workload) as well as career and life stage changes (promotions, departmental or faculty leadership roles, changing family circumstances) often result in a lack of engagement by mid/senior-career colleagues. The burden of committee roles thus falls disproportionately on earlier career colleagues—including those on precarious contracts (Nick Gill, 30 June 2023; Mark Goodwin, 12 May 2023; Mark Whitehead, 7 June 2023). These pressures also link to a growing challenge for the PolGRG as declining numbers of senior political geographers attend the RGS-IBG conference and PolGRG AGM (Sara Fregonese, 5 May 2023; Mike Woods, 15 September 2023). How this trend might be addressed is a delicate question—(re) engaging mid- and senior-career scholars could both boost the profile of the sub-discipline (and research group), offering facilitatory roles (e.g., chairing conference sessions), and providing additional networking and mentoring support to early career academics, but at the same time this comes with the risk of privileging senior voices and stifling emerging areas of work while reinforcing dominant conventions.

A more fundamental concern is with the hidden/service workload taken on (generally) by early career researchers who tend to be relied upon to populate the research group committee. With current resource levels—and continuing

financial contractions in the sector—the hand-to-mouth existence of research groups will undoubtedly continue. Rather than bemoaning any perceived lack of ambition or activities, it seems more appropriate to recalibrate our expectations of these groups, recognising that increasing professional (and other) pressures elsewhere are constricting time and resources to engage with research group activities. This asks us to understand that for early career academics, research group committee roles *can* be helpful (through networking, developing professional standing and reputation); these duties *may also* be potentially damaging (they take time away from other activities, the 'CV Points' for these roles seemingly carry a decreasing weight, etc.). Two considerations thus emerge: firstly, how can research groups (and the RGS) mitigate the risks of overburdening early career academics with these roles; and secondly, how sustainable is the systematic reliance upon goodwill/service activities and sacrifice of time by scholars to maintain these groups in the face of increasingly metricised and pressured professional context, in which the reciprocal benefits of research group engagement are diminishing?

If the role of research groups is genuinely valued, then for how much longer can these roles remain un-workloaded (in particular, for early career academics)? As workload pressures rise, it is likely that existing challenges in filling committee roles will increase: many previous committee members (myself included) found themselves in these positions through a mix of serendipity (in being encouraged to attend an AGM) and necessity—both Nick Gill (in 2011) and David Atkinson (during the 1990s) described the moment when requests are made for nominees to take on a committee role and as there are very few people in the meeting 'all eyes turn to you, don't they' (Gill, 30 June 2023). Or, as David Atkinson (22 May 2023) phrased it, 'once you're in the community, because there weren't all that many people, you were just asked to do jobs'. Amidst a context of increasingly heightened workload pressures, the very real danger exists that the positive developments and diversification of recent years will be lost as those available to take on committee roles are either already over-stretched and facing burnout or are the privileged few in more senior academic roles. Such concerns with the sustainability of service workloads and of backsliding on diversity and inclusion are unlikely to be confined to a single research group. This leads to a question for the discipline—and academic departments/schools: if our research groups are genuinely valued and important, how do we collectively shoulder responsibility for their sustained—and sustainable—future?

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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Endnotes

[1] For a similar project in relation to the Higher Education Research Group of the RGS-IBG, see Healey et al. (2022).

[2] The UK Social Science Research Council was established in 1965 as the state funding body for academic social science research. It was renamed the Economic and Social Research Council in 1983.

[3] The Russell Group of universities in the UK is a self-selected group of 24 'world-class' research-intensive universities (https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities/) that tend to benefit from a disproportionate level of research grant and contract income, lower teaching loads, and greater research support than most other Higher Education Institutions in the country. This self-branding remains a powerful marketing and recruitment tool and contributes to continued, significant intra-national inequalities in knowledge production (Hammett et al., 2024).

[4] Prize winning dissertations have engaged with a raft of issues and geographies, including Faye Simpson (2011, University of Edinburgh), 'I am educated therefore I am ...? An ethnographic examination of the incoherencies of education for equality in a post-conflict landscape of difference', Sam Nariani (2014, University of Nottingham), 'Women's activism in Barnsley's communities during the 1984–5 miners'

strike', Ben Ayres (2016, UCL), 'Constructing an Arctic laboratory: oil spill simulations at the hydrocarbon frontier', Heather Boswell (2019, University of Glasgow), 'Spatial trauma: investigating the material and psychological repercussions of austerity on the people and place of Paisley', Eliza Norris (2020, University of Oxford), 'Rehabilitating the "artery of life": survival, resilience and medical care in the underground hospital'.

[5] The first recipient of the prize was Reece Jones for his 2016 book *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (Verso), with subsequent winners Sara Fregonese (2019) *War and the City: Urban Geopolitics in Lebanon* (Bloomsbury), Alessandro Rippa (2020) *Borderland Infrastructures: Trade, Development, and Control in Western China* (Amsterdam University Press), Louise Amoore (2020) *Cloud Ethics: Algorithms and the Attributes of Ourselves and Others* (Duke University Press), and Rupal Oza (2022) *Semiotics of Rape: Sexual Subjectivity and Violation in Rural India* (Duke University Press).

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