

A day in the life of a DSES PhD student

My name is Jonathon Dawes, and I am an ESRC-funded PhD student in the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences (DSES) at Durham University. My research examines how and why the way British tennis is organised shapes collective efforts to widen participation.

I am supported by the Northern Ireland and North East Doctoral Training Partnership (NINE DTP) through its 1+3.5 studentship. Before officially joining DSES in October 2025, I completed the first year of the programme: an MA in Research Methods (Political Science) in Durham's School of Government and International Affairs.

No two days during a PhD are quite the same, but I picked a typical Wednesday in March.

I began the day by answering a few emails before stopping for a game of tennis at Durham Archery Tennis Club on my way into the department, allowing me to build sport and physical activity into my day. I played with another PhD student in Maths whom I met through Ustinov College, Durham's only exclusively postgraduate college. Tennis is also the subject of my PhD, meaning that being around the sport gives me useful space to reflect on my research, test some of my thinking and remain connected to the setting I am studying. It is not formally "doing research", but some of my best ideas have emerged while playing, coaching or talking to people around tennis.

From there, I walked across Prebends Bridge and through the historic Bailey, part of Durham's UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is a beautiful and inspiring walk into the department—and not a bad way to start the day.

At 10am, I attended the weekly DSES Research Seminar Series. The seminars provide an opportunity to hear from researchers within and beyond the department, learn about work taking place across different areas of sport and exercise sciences, and discuss new ideas in a friendly environment.

After the seminar, I met with my supervisors to prepare for the annual DSES Postgraduate Research Conference, where PGR students come together to share their work. Having such supportive supervisors working across sport policy and sociology, and based at Durham and Northumbria, gives me different perspectives on my project. I then met separately with my primary supervisor to discuss a forthcoming Routledge handbook chapter and conference presentation. Supporting the progress of the PhD is, of course, the priority, but the department also encourages us to pursue opportunities to share and develop our research.

At lunchtime, I headed into town with one of the other PGR students in the department. These informal conversations with other researchers are an important part of life in DSES and a welcome break from the desk.

I spent the rest of the afternoon reading Elinor Ostrom's *Governing the Commons*, a key text for my PhD. Reading, thinking and writing make up a significant part of doctoral research. Reading helps us keep up to date with research in our field, identify concepts that might explain what we are finding and consider how our own work relates to existing knowledge. I made notes as I read and began connecting Ostrom's ideas to the organisations and relationships I am studying within British tennis.

Afterwards, I headed home for dinner. In the evening, in my role as President of Ustinov College Graduate Common Room, I attended our weekly Executive Committee meeting, followed by our tradition of going to the pub afterwards.

Durham is a collegiate university, and every student is assigned to a college. The collegiate system is a great way to meet people beyond your department, become more involved in student life and develop personally through a wide range of enrichment opportunities, including events, sport and volunteering. It brought a busy but enjoyable day to a close.