

REPORT ON GGA/RSA POSTGRADUATE SEMINAR

Part of the

2026 GHANA GEOGRAPHERS ASSOCIATION ANNUAL CONFERENCE

University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

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Report by Benedict Arko, RSA Ambassador to Ghana

INTRODUCTION

The Postgraduate Training Seminar at the Ghana Geographers' Association (GGA) Annual Conference 2026 began at 8:30 a.m. on 25 September 2026 in Seminar Room 2, Students Centre, North Campus, University of Education, Winneba. There were about fifty postgraduate students physically present and over thirty joining through Zoom. The resource persons also joined in through Zoom, with Dr. Alex Holmes of the RSA hosting the seminar. The seminar was in two sessions, details of which are provided below.



SEMINAR ONE

Thinking with Theory - Moving Postgraduate Research Beyond Description

The first session, hosted by the Regional Studies Association, featured Professor John Harrison of Loughborough University on the theme “Thinking with Theory: Moving Postgraduate Research Beyond Description.”

Prof. Harrison emphasized the importance of using theory to develop a sustained academic argument rather than treating postgraduate research as a collection of descriptions. He distinguished between concepts, frameworks, models and theories, explaining their different purposes in organizing, describing, simplifying and explaining research problems. Examples discussed included Territory, Place, Scale and Network as concepts, TPSN as a framework, and the Burgess Concentric Zone Model as an example of a model.

A major lesson was the importance of literature review as a debate rather than a summary of the literature. Participants were encouraged to compare, connect and challenge existing scholarship by asking where theories agree or disagree, what contexts they were developed in, and what they may be unable to explain. Prof. Harrison referred to these limitations as theoretical “blind spots”, arguing that identifying such gaps can provide an opportunity for an original contribution, particularly when established theories are applied to contexts such as Ghana.

The workshop also addressed the relationship between theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions. Participants were encouraged to ask what an existing theory helps them to see and, importantly, what it fails to explain. The discussion suggested that a theory’s blind spot can provide the basis for developing new questions, methods, or interpretations within a research context.

During the Q&A, participants asked about using multiple theories and the possibility of combining theoretical perspectives. Prof. Harrison explained that researchers can bring theories together within a theoretical framework, provided that they compare their respective strengths and limitations rather than simply listing several theories. He noted that competing theories can contribute to academic debate because different theories may explain different aspects of a research problem.

A particularly significant discussion concerned inductive and deductive approaches to theorizing. A participant questioned the tendency to require students to adopt established named theories and asked whether researchers could instead develop explanations from their empirical findings. In response, Prof. Harrison emphasized the need to position research within existing knowledge while remaining open to what the research itself reveals. He argued that researchers should engage with theory before conducting research and then return to theory after analysing their findings to determine what the research adds or what existing explanations may have overlooked.

Prof. Harrison also cautioned against selecting theories simply because they are famous or historically established. The emphasis, he noted, should be on relevance and explanatory power, particularly in relation to the context being studied.

The session concluded with the “washing line” analogy, through which Prof. Harrison described a thesis as a sustained academic argument around which its different components should be connected. Concepts, frameworks, models and literature should therefore contribute to and support the central argument rather than appear as disconnected sections.

Overall, the seminar encouraged postgraduate researchers to move beyond merely describing their research problem and instead think critically with theory, identify theoretical blind spots, engage competing explanations, and develop a clear and sustained academic argument.

SEMINAR TWO

From Thesis to Publication

Prof. Joanie Willett of the University of Exeter facilitated a session on ‘From Thesis to Publication’, focusing on how postgraduate researchers can transform their thesis research into publishable journal articles and books. Drawing on her experience as an academic author and journal co-editor, she demystified the publication process and highlighted practical strategies for identifying suitable outlets and improving acceptance chances.

Prof Willett emphasized the significant difference between a thesis and a journal article. While a thesis may contain approximately 80,000–90,000 words and address a broad research problem, a journal article is much shorter, typically around 8,000–9,000 words, and therefore requires a focused central argument. Participants were encouraged to examine their thesis and identify distinct articles that could be developed from different aspects of their research.

She also outlined the main building blocks of a journal article: the abstract, introduction, literature review, research methods and methodology, empirical findings, discussion and conclusion. Particular attention was given to the abstract, which she explained should briefly communicate what the paper is about, the literature or theoretical debate it engages with, its central argument and the empirical basis of the study. The abstract therefore helps readers determine whether the article is relevant to their interests.

A major part of the session addressed journal selection and the peer-review process. Using the journal, *Territory, Politics and Governance* as an example, Dr Willett demonstrated how researchers can examine a journal's aims and scope, recent publications and author guidelines to determine whether their work fits. She explained that manuscripts normally pass through an initial editorial assessment before being considered by a co-editor and sent to reviewers. Authors may subsequently be asked to undertake major or minor revisions before a final decision is reached and the paper proceeds to production.

Dr Willett stressed that publication is a lengthy process and that a submitted manuscript should not be regarded as a finished product. Reviewer comments and revisions are an important part of strengthening academic work. She encouraged researchers to develop judgement about when to defend their arguments and when to acknowledge limitations and respond constructively to reviewers. She also advised participants to submit to outlets that regularly publish and cite work related to their research area.

During the question-and-answer session, participants raised concerns about identifying predatory journals and the importance of reading widely. In response, Prof. Willett encouraged researchers to consider whether a journal is genuinely relevant to their field by examining the scholarship they themselves engage with and the journal's citation index. She also agreed that sustained reading is essential for understanding a research field and noted that reviewer comments can continue the learning process even after completion of a PhD.

In closing, Prof Willett encouraged African researchers to submit work to *Territory, Politics and Governance*, noting the journal's interest in research from Africa, particularly studies that connect African empirical material with broader theoretical questions. The session provided postgraduate researchers with practical guidance on converting their research into focused, well-targeted and publishable academic articles.