

**“How to be the conference star”, Higher Education Special Report, *The Australian*,  
September 8, 2007.**

REMEMBER that hip party you attended when you first started university? You saw it as a chance for social advancement, to meet new people, but when you arrived you were confronted by a sea of strange faces, most of whom knew each other and all of whom were having a great time. So there you stood, alone, trying to look cool while discomfort oozed from every pore, until you finally gave in and either left or hid in the toilet.

Attending an academic conference for the first time can present a similar set of problems.

Let's face it, there's a lot of bluster and bravado surrounding conferences. Listening to the veterans talk you'd think they were a complete doddle - subsidised travel, new friends to make, high-flying academics to impress, networking aplenty and lots of partying afterwards.

If you're a conference virgin then all this talk may just add to your sense of intimidation. But forewarned is forearmed, so to help you get through your first conference let's address some common misconceptions.

TURNING UP IS HALF THE BATTLE For a shy postgrad, the temptation may be to skip most of the papers, including your own. So turning up is the first step. But sitting at the back in silence won't get you very far.

Luckily, a conference is one place where being socially awkward puts you in good company.

Academics are renowned for their social ineptness. So relax, get into it and embrace the gauche. You are among your people.

A PAPER CAN MAKE OR BREAK YOUR CAREER You may fear that you'll irrevocably damage your reputation if your paper isn't a hit. And it's true, if you break down in tears, wet yourself or deny the Holocaust then people may talk. But remember - academics have notoriously short memories. Aside from David Irving, nobody's career was ever ended by a dodgy conference presentation. Anyway, as a postgraduate, the only people likely to be in attendance at your paper will be close friends, your supervisor and some Swedish guy who misread the timetable.

So relax.

NETWORK THE CONFERENCE DINNER If you can get away without making a fool of yourself at the conference dinner, it's a win.

Stick to the golden rule: guzzling gallons of complimentary wine will not make you more interesting. You may think to yourself, "I'll just have one more glass of the Chateau

Chuck before bed," but it could be that fateful tippie that sees you sharing your ideas, your singing voice and your poetry with your new conference friends. Just remember you'll be seeing them the next morning, stone cold sober.

Conferences are the quintessential shindigs of academic discourse, and attendance is an obligatory right of passage. If you do find yourself hiding in the toilets on the first morning, make sure you introduce yourself to the person hiding in the next cubicle. He or she might just be the intellectual giant of tomorrow.