

# From Conference Paper to Journal Article: The long and Winding Road

Les Worrall

Coventry University, UK

[Worrall.L@sky](mailto:Worrall.L@sky)

## 1 The Context

Over the last couple of decades academia has changed radically as most universities have developed what I call “output driven” research strategies. Consequently, academics have to do things that “count” against the metrics that are embedded within these strategies. It doesn’t matter whether you consider these developments are a good thing or a bad thing as, whatever you think, they provide the framework against which you will be judged. They also provide the framework against which you will be promoted (or not) and you will be recruited (or not). Your curriculum vitae (and you) will be audited against these frameworks.

I have been involved with supervising PhD students and mentoring academic staff for many years and this article is based on the experiences I have had helping colleagues develop their academic careers (some of whom are now professors, readers and directors of doctoral programmes in well-respected universities). I have always tried to impress upon all those I have supervised or mentored the importance of taking a strategic and, some might say, a highly instrumental approach to developing their academic careers. I try to emphasise to them the importance of developing what I have termed the four pillars of an academic career and then building a curriculum vitae around those four pillars.

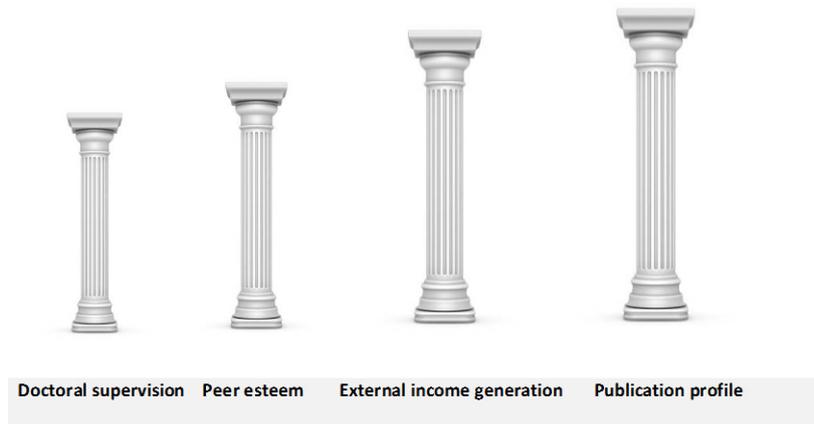
The four pillars are:

- a robust publications profile (of, preferably, single authored papers in rated journals)
- a track record in external income generation (from, preferably, funding councils)
- peer esteem in their academic field
- a credible profile in doctoral supervision

Of the four, I see a robust publications profile as the most important pillar but, in the increasingly mercenary world in which we live, this is very closely followed by success in external income generation. In some universities, an ability to generate external income might even come first.

The aim of this paper is to provide guidance to doctoral students and more junior academics on developing a credible publications profile. It is unlikely that a recent PhD graduate or junior academic will be able to get a paper published in a top journal unless the paper is co-authored with a more senior academic. Co-authoring papers with a more senior academic when you are in the early stages of your academic career can be a sound tactic.

All publishing careers have to start somewhere and, for most doctoral students and junior academics, their first foray into airing their work in public is when they present a paper to a conference. Consequently, the purpose of this article is to provide some guidance on how to turn a conference paper into a refereed journal article. As a former cricketer, the most important thing you need to do when you go out to bat is to “get off the mark”. Few batsmen ever get off the mark by hitting a six and most are happy just to push a quick single to get their innings moving. When you have got off the mark, your real job is then to build a solid innings that looks impressive in the scorebook.



**Figure 1:** The four pillars of an academic career

### **1.1 Be selective**

Presenting a paper at a conference often gives the researcher their first chance to expose their ideas to what can be a very critical (and sometimes pedantic) academic audience. Obviously academic conferences vary considerably in quality. Highly rated conferences expose candidate papers to robust peer review prior to acceptance. If you have got through this process, there is a good chance that you have a paper of publishable quality. Your task is now to get your paper accepted in as high a quality journal as you can. However, the height of the hurdle you have to jump to get a paper published in a reputable academic journal is considerably more difficult to clear than the one you have just negotiated to get your paper accepted at a conference.

Other conferences (of the less esteemed variety) will allow almost anyone to present anything often to a handful of younger, less experienced researchers or “academic tourists” (of which, there are many and whose ranks you should not join). Consequently, you have to be true to yourself about where you are on this continuum. If you are currently at the lower end of this continuum you are wasting your time and you should aim considerably higher. If it is not difficult to get a paper accepted, the conference is not worth going to. If you have had your paper accepted at a good quality conference and your paper has been peer reviewed and generated good debate from a well-informed audience, you have a very good chance of getting it published in a highly rated journal.

The better the conference, the more likely you are to present your work to the top people in your chosen field. Consequently, you should be very selective and focused when you are considering which conferences to attend. There is no point padding your CV with low grade conference papers. Your CV will look far more impressive if you have presented papers to a smaller number of well-regarded conferences than if you have presented a large number of papers at low grade conferences. In today’s academia, where you have published is more important than what you have published.

### **1.2 Be strategic and think “networking”**

When you attend a conference, you should have a strategy for managing your time at the conference. Yes, you want to be seen to give a good quality presentation but academic conferences are also social events which provide you with the opportunity to network with both leading and developing academics in your field. In particular, you should try to find out who is in your audience when you present your paper as they may be journal editors or on the editorial boards of the papers you want to target. Again, not only should you be targeting specific conferences, you should also be targeting specific journals. If you find established academics or journal editors have attended your paper, go and talk to them to get their views about your paper. If they are involved with journals, try to find out what their journal is looking for; what current editorial policies and priorities are; and, what kind of papers their journal is likely to publish. If you are really lucky, journal editors might approach you about your paper. This is rare but it does happen.

I have often found that the networking pay-offs from conference attendance are the most valuable outcomes. I have been offered publishing opportunities and the chance to speak at other conferences and high profile events. I have been approached by other academics to undertake collaborative research or to join partnerships and teams to bid for research funding. I have also been offered lucrative consulting work and jobs at other institutions. Conferences are a very important aspect of academic life and they can help you build an impressive academic CV – if you get it right.

### **1.3 Be tactical**

If you are hoping to transform your conference paper into an article in a rated academic journal, you should select conferences that have links to good quality journals (see the ABS List for guidance, <http://www.associationofbusinessschools.org/sites/default/files/Combined%20Journal%20Guide.pdf>). Some conferences will often use papers from a conference or a conference theme to develop a special edition of their journal (which is usually edited by someone involved in the conference organisation). You should always look for conferences that have these links in place as having your paper accepted for such a conference often means that the editorial team have already seen merit in your work. In other instances, conferences are used to identify chapters for edited books. While book chapters do not carry the same weight as an article in a top rated academic journal, it will not do your CV any harm to have contributed a chapter to a well-regarded book particularly if it has been edited by a leading authority in your field. When you are deciding what to do with a paper or an article, you should ask yourself what is the best value you can get out of this paper as you try to build your academic CV.

### **1.4 Be instrumental**

Even experienced researchers can get nervous presenting a paper BUT you should really pay great attention to the questions you are asked and the issues that your audience raises. You should certainly pay more attention to any negative issues that get raised than to any positive ones as your aim should always be to use negative (but hopefully, constructive) feedback to strengthen your paper rather than use positive feedback to boost your ego. You should also be very careful with how you deal with feedback particularly if it is of the unhelpful and negative type. I remember, as a very young academic, getting savaged by “an expert” in my field who was keen to impress the audience with his knowledge and his status. All he really did was alienate the audience with his arrogance and undermine my self-confidence. Other people from the audience provided really useful feedback that helped me to rework the paper and to get it published in a journal which was in the top five in its field.

You should certainly make a note of who are most vociferous/influential attendees in your session and go and talk to them after your session has ended. If people approach you after your session, take time to talk to them and listen to them. If no one approaches you after your presentation, worry. You should also see a conference as another peer review opportunity and you need to use the conference to identify any flaws in your arguments or any weaknesses in your paper. The weaknesses could be analytical flaws such as not using the most up to date analytical techniques or not making full or proper use of these techniques. Another weakness could be that you have missed relevant literature indicating that you have not done as exhaustive a literature review as you needed to. After attending conferences, I have often used information from papers presented in my stream or in parallel streams to improve my paper particularly when authors have looked at the issues I am addressing from different theoretical positions or have used different methodologies to address similar issues to mine. Sometimes you need to be able to look at your research from a completely different angle. A good conference will provide you with these opportunities.

### **1.5 Be calculating**

Immediately after presenting your paper, make a list of the issues that have emerged and decide how you are going to deal with them. Don't be tempted to fire your paper off to a journal without giving full consideration to how your paper can be further improved following the conference. Being impatient and submitting a paper too early can cause you a significant problem as journals are unlikely to accept repeat submissions of the same paper. With top rated journals, you only get one chance. So, when you have redrafted your paper, it is a good idea to ask someone who is an expert in the field (that you may have met at a conference) or a trusted academic colleague to review your revised paper before you submit it to your chosen journal. You should always aim high with the journals you target (again, consult the ABS list for guidance). While you should aim

high, you should always be realistic as it is far from easy to get published in the top rated journals in any field. But, if you are rejected by a top journal, you can always aim lower with a submission to another journal. Getting published in the top rated journals is incredibly difficult even for established researchers: learning to handle rejection and bounce back is an essential academic skill.

### **1.6 Be savvy**

If you think your paper has a good chance of getting published you need to select a candidate journal or a shortlist of journals. You then need to research those journals to see what kind of papers they publish to see if they have published papers similar to yours; to see if your paper fills a gap in any of those journals; and, to identify the kind of issues/themes that have been published in these journals recently. Obviously, if your research area has been exhaustively covered in a journal, then you need to move on to another journal.

You should certainly get hold of the editorial guidance notes for the journals you are considering. But don't just get them, **read them and do what they say**. I have been a reviewer for a number of journals and grant awarding bodies for many years, and I cannot tell you how annoying it is when the clear guidance that has been provided has not been followed. As a reviewer, you immediately feel negatively disposed to the paper particularly when other authors have produced good quality work **and** worked within the guidelines. Authors need to be assiduous in removing sloppy errors such as missing references or incorrectly citing papers. You should not do anything that will annoy the editors or reviewers as you want them to become positively disposed to you and your work. You should also think long and hard about your papers' title and the abstract as these are the two most "visible" parts of your paper. Journal editors are very busy people and an uninspiring abstract can easily consign your work to the dustbin of history.

### **1.7 Be aware**

It is also good practice to include a covering letter with your article which indicates to the journal editor how your paper fits his/her journal and gives them a compelling reason to publish your work. However, with the increasing use of automated submission systems this approach has become more difficult. You should certainly look at the list of people who are members of the journal's editorial board as it is highly likely that your paper will be sent to people on that list. As these people will often be prominent in your field, you should have read some of their papers and you should not only look at their style of writing but also form a view of their prejudices and "dispositions". If you haven't cited any papers from the journal you are submitting your paper to, why are you submitting your paper to that journal?

When you submit your paper to a particular journal, you should write specifically for that journal. If your paper gets rejected (not an uncommon event even for experienced researchers), be prepared to do some more work to reshape it for another journal. Never (ever) submit your work to two journals simultaneously - if either journal finds out, your work will be immediately rejected and your reputation gets tarnished. In fact, most journals ask you to confirm that you have not submitted your paper anywhere else and that your paper has not been published anywhere else.

### **1.8 Be professional**

It is rare for people to get a paper accepted in a good journal without the editor and/or reviewers asking you to revise and resubmit your paper. This can go on for two or three or more iterations until the reviewers and the editor feel that your paper "passes muster". I have seen papers finally rejected after the third iteration. The whole process can be tiring and tiresome but you have to persist.

If you are asked to do a revise and resubmit, you should:

- Read the reviewers comments very carefully and take them very seriously even if you disagree with them and think they are unreasonable and you are annoyed/upset by them
- Respond clearly, concisely and fully to the reviewers' comments
- Send the editor a letter indicating how you have responded to each of the reviewers' comments and where they can check this in the text

Editors really like authors who make life easy for them, so do what you can to make their life easy. This involves following editorial guidelines closely; responding clearly and concisely to reviewers' comments; and, responding promptly and fully. As the trajectory of your academic career depends on journal editors deciding to publish your work and not the work of other academics who have submitted papers to their journal, it really makes sense for you to treat them well. Remember, a top journal might publish about fifty articles a year but the editor might receive 6-700 submissions a year. As our American friends might say: "do the math". You need to do everything you can to make sure that your's is one of the papers that is selected as the cards are stacked against you.

## **2 In a nutshell**

As a newly graduated PhD or a junior academic, you need to think very strategically, tactically and instrumentally about the development of your career. If you have recently completed a PhD, you should be thinking very tactically about how you can turn parts of your thesis into conference papers and, ultimately, into peer reviewed journal articles. I had a very good doctoral supervisor who advised me to get my work published prior to submitting my doctorate. These published works were then included in my thesis as appendices. My supervisor's argument was that my case for being awarded a PhD was strengthened if my single authored work had already been published in "rated" journals. This tendency towards instrumentalism has stayed with me throughout my academic career. I would advise you to be just as instrumental.

You need to target good quality conferences where all the papers submitted are peer reviewed prior to acceptance. If the conference is of the "pay and display" variety, avoid it as you are wasting your time. If you have a paper accepted for a conference, think long and hard about how you are going to make the conference work for you. Who is going to the conference? Are any of your fellow delegates on the editorial boards of the journals which might publish your work? With whom do you need to network? Do you need to work on your networking skills? Who is attending your session? How can you get useful and insightful feedback on your paper (being aware that this might hurt)?

Which journals might publish your work? Where do different journals sit in the hierarchy of journals? Realistically, which journal is likely to publish your work? Is there anyone at the conference with whom you can collaborate (especially if they are better connected than you)? What are the key criticisms of your work? How can you use the feedback you have received to improve your paper? When you submit your paper to a journal, have you followed their guidelines **to the letter**? If you have been invited to revise and resubmit your paper, have you adequately responded to all the issues the reviewers have raised and documented your responses in an accompanying letter?

Becoming a well-published academic is a long and challenging process. It requires hard work and some luck. It can be as infuriating as it can be rewarding. But, the process has to start somewhere and, for many developing academics, it starts with a reworked and revised conference paper eventually getting accepted in a reputable journal.