

Conferences are like swans

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Viewpoint

Conferences Are Like Swans

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Abstract

Chris Corker was the lead on bringing the 2011 Higher Education Research Scholarship Group Conference to fruition, both in the months preceding the event and on the day. In this viewpoint, Chris shares his experiences of conference administration and delivery, and explores how conferences and swans have more in common than you would imagine.

Imagine a majestic white swan gliding gracefully across a lake. Picture how it travels, so effortlessly drifting over the surface of the water, as if its journey began with some divine intervention and nothing could interrupt the path it had chosen to take.

Have you ever paused to consider in this situation what goes on *below* the waterline?

Such a graceful journey is only possible thanks to the swan's webbed feet, moving against the resistance of the water with rapid ferocity. The illusion of a smooth voyage is all but shattered when you consider all of the effort which goes into making the swan move at all.

Now, picture yourself as a delegate at a conference. In the case of the HERSG Action Research conference, you would probably have attended the keynote lecture, visited a range of parallel sessions you found interesting, enjoyed the opportunity for some lunch and the chance to catch up with colleagues you hadn't seen for a while, before attending the closing

plenary and then departing, hopefully with a sense of the day having progressed very well and you personally having gained something worthwhile out of the experience.

Have you ever considered what goes on behind the scenes of a conference to provide such a seemingly effortless final presentation? Much like the swan in our metaphor, while a conference may appear to progress rather effortlessly, behind the scenes, just as below the waterline, there is much frantic action to ensure what you see progresses as smoothly as possible.

That isn't to say things don't go wrong, and when they do, it is often something that wasn't planned for. Case in point, at the Action Research conference, a mere 20 minutes into the first parallel session of the day, an overhead projector bulb opted to cease working. In an age of PowerPoint and digital presentations this could have been a rather large spanner in the works for the rest of the day. After a rather hurried chat with some IT staff, and some good old-fashioned improvisation, we managed to use a portable screen with little more than a five minute delay. If you weren't in that session you wouldn't have known anything had gone wrong.

Not that I dislike being a part of planning and delivering conferences, far from it. I quite enjoy the organisational chaos below the proverbial waterline. When I was asked to help HERSG put this conference together I readily took the opportunity. Having been involved in running similar conferences and events before, I knew of the benefits which could be derived for both presenters and attendees. Simply as a networking opportunity, the conference allowed people with similar interests and areas of research to discuss and explore potential working relationships in a way not easily possible in such a vast University. While there is an awful lot of work goes into putting a conference together, the end product and feedback from delegates are what make it worthwhile.

PS. Note to self, invest in some projector bulbs before the 2012 HERSG conference...