



Commencing with confidence

SOFTWARE | LEON SPENCER

*Emailed to ITEE
Staff 2/17 MS*

A new, free, online computer program has been developed to ease the daunting task of organising, chairing and administering conferences. Developed by University of Queensland Information Technology School's Associate Professor Brian Lovell the conference and meeting software, called Commence (short for Conference and Meeting Management with Electronic Notification and Committee Exchanges) can be accessed and used through any web browser and allows the user to collect, review, accept or reject and edit papers and conference submissions.

Commence can also manage scheduling and create a program and can even print name-tags.

"It's effectively a browser-managed application that handles most of the paperwork for a conference," Lovell says. "The administrator can even delegate various roles to different chairs. You can scale it up to run quite large events."

Lovell, who with the help of his students, adapted the program for online use, says he originally designed the software for himself.

"I wrote it for myself when I wanted to run conferences," he says. "It solved the problem of not being able to find any software that I could install on our network."

Since its adaptation for online, Lovell says that he has been able to use it anywhere there is a computer.

"I've been overseas and I've been reading reviews and accepting and rejecting papers from my laptop," he says. "Once it's installed, you can really administer it from anywhere. You don't have to have physical access to the machine that it runs on."

And, in an act of great magnanimity for the conference-going academic community, Lovell decided to make it available for others to use – free of charge.

The software has been used for over 25 international conferences already and has been translated into six languages.

The website receives about 4000 hits and 250 downloads a month.

Word of mouth and exposure to the software are proving to be its greatest sales pitch.

"If somebody installed the software for a conference where there are 200 delegates, those people get exposed to the software and if any of them decide to run a conference they might decide to get a copy of it."

Its price point, zero, is obviously a major attraction for Commence – similar programs need to be paid for.

"Students contributed to the project and I don't pay them, they do it for experience," he says. "And if they're going to work on a project, then I'm not going to charge for it."

"It's a very good way to expose your uni to the outside world," he says. "I encourage other people in the academic community to put something back into the community instead of just taking stuff from overseas."

Commence can be downloaded from
<http://sourceforge.net/projects/iaprcommence/>