

# Conference call to arms creates free, global software

By **LIA TIMSON**

Brian Lovell is honoured that people from as far as Germany, Hong Kong and Kenya are using his conference management software but he is adamant he will never commercialise it.

Mr Lovell, assistant professor and director of engineering at the School of IT and Engineering, University of Queensland, started writing his own software program while chairing industry conferences in 2003.

He says the free alternatives available to academics at the time did not allow event organisers enough flexibility to tailor them to technical conferences. Commercial programs were too expensive for academic use.

"I wrote it to solve my problem, basically. But I don't mind if anyone else uses it," Mr Lovell says.

Commence is a web-based application available for download from the open-source website, SourceForge, as a 1.5MB zip file. It is used by event organisers to keep track of speakers, presentation submissions and reviewers' notes without the mountains of paperwork common to multiple-speaker conferences. It requires a web-server with PHP 4 or 5.0 and another open-source database program, MySQL, to enable conference papers to be easily stored.

"We used to have several secretaries to organise a large conference. We'd have four (hard) copies of each (speaker's) paper and would send them to different reviewers to get their notes. Now it's virtually instantaneously. Reviewers can log in, get all papers assigned to them, ask for revisions and recommend for approval. Speakers can submit, modify and resub-

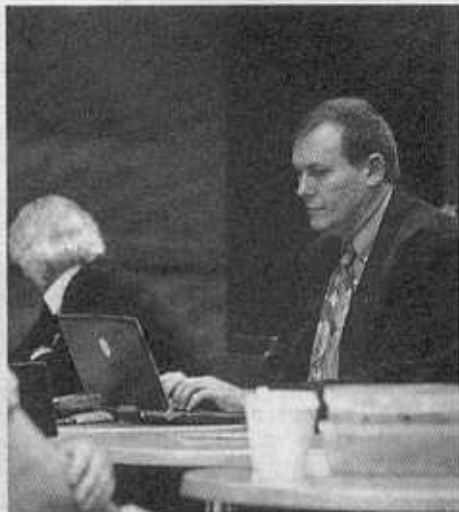
mit their papers, also in multiple versions," he says.

The system administrator chairing the organising committee can manage the entire event from his or her notebook.

He says Commence is comparable to commercially available software costing about \$10,000 per event. However, it's free and can be changed by users to suit their needs.

"You're not relying on a third party (to fix it)," he says.

Mr Lovell will not commer-



**Professor Brian Lovell**

PICTURE: STEVE HOLLAND

cialise Commence, even though it is in use by 27 international conferences and has been translated into Italian, French, Portuguese and Chinese. Students and users helped to write and revise the program and he says it wouldn't be ethical to profit from it.

"I put it on the website not thinking that anyone would use it. It's an eye-opening experience, quite an honour," Mr Lovell says.

"I think that's the sort of thing universities should be doing, putting code out there for people to use."

Commence is not related to the American-based software company of the same name.

#### LINKS

[sourceforge.net/projects/iaprcommence/](http://sourceforge.net/projects/iaprcommence/)