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CWC 2008: Networking in Action

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CONFERENCE DETAILS

CWC is the Computing Women Congress, a biennial event for women in computer science and related fields to meet, network, learn, and encourage one another in their careers. Such events are needed in the current climate of low interest in the computing field as a career for women in New Zealand. This brief article describes the main activities of the third edition of CWC, whcih took place on February 11-13, 2008 in Hamilton, New Zealand. The event was hosted by the University of Waikato.

REPORT

We recently attended the Computing Women Congress (CWC) at Waikato University in Hamilton along with a number of researchers and others from the various fields of computing. The group was mixed with attendees of all ages from the university and polytechnic sectors of New Zealand and overseas, including academics, students, and professional women from the IT industry. The congress ran for three days in February 2008 hosted by the School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences. The next CWC will be held in 2010; earlier congress ran in 2005 and 2006.

Based on a German model, the Informatica Feminale aims to promote computer science as a course of study for females. CWC takes the form of a series of short courses in topics of interest in computer science and related IT fields offered by women and for women. Since Germany has introduced women-only degree programmes to encourage women into the applied fields of computer science and engineering, in that country, a women-only event has become an extension of the normal university year.

The New Zealand version of the congress has the same aim as the Informatica Feminale. In addition CWC aims to provide role models for younger women entering the profession or academia, to provide networking opportunities for students, academics and industry professionals, and to form a community that shares interests and knowledge within the Pan-Pacific region.

The courses at CWC give attendees a chance to learn new skills in a supportive and collaborative environment. After all, who has the time or opportunity to learn what a test-driven development is and how to do it, once they have been teaching project management

for a few years? But you could try it out at CWC. Courses ranged across a spectrum of computer science topics and included professional development topics and IT-related gender research. Classes were kept small and an informal tutorial style of delivery was encouraged. The courses were offered by participants from New Zealand and overseas. Topics this year included web frameworks, content management systems, ontologies on the semantic web, evaluation methods for software tools, agile methods and test-driven development, peer-to-peer computing, data compression, context-aware computing, statistical tests, artificial intelligence robotics and philosophy, hypertext methods, and on-line performance environments. A professional stream included presenting, business networking, and managing conflict. The gender and IT stream focused on gender issues in IT education and work, and, girls and media technology.

Keynotes each evening addressed the experiences of women in computing followed by dinner at a local restaurant. Barbara Crump of Massey University, presented her New Zealand-based empirical study on women's' perceptions of their ICT workplace with questions around the key areas of culture, work-life balance, salaries, negotiation and glass ceiling. Her findings have revealed a gendered division of labour in the ICT workplace, the implications of the enduring stereotyped geek image, and how socially-shaped gendered attitudinal differences affect aspects of the work environment. Gloria Jacobs discussed her experiences as a software developer in New York City, the lack of female role models, the invisibility of the Geek Girl, and how this problem could be fixed. On the last evening the keynote was a chance for successful women to tell their personal stories.

A special session was held for student papers and topics ranged from image processing techniques for determining solar exposure, process modeling of collaborative learning communities, employees computing requirements of new graduates, and a critical discourse analysis on government policy on women's uptake of roles in the ICT sector.

One question that concerned us when deciding to attend, was, why is this only for women? A colleague, who regularly attends Industry Developer conferences said, "Well, it makes a nice change from being one of three women sitting with 500 men". And late last year it was reported that only 1% of the attendees was female at the European TechEd Forum event. This illustrates the isolation many women feel when working in the field, either as a student, an academic, or in industry (Trauth & Howcroft, 2006). Female students often feel this keenly as they move through their courses and find that there are few other females, either fellow students or lecturers, in their classes. These women students are a precious asset in New Zealand. Calls abound in the Western world for diversification of computing student intakes (Gallivan, Adya, Ahuja, Hoonakker, & Woszczynski, 2006), and for strategies to encourage girls into computing (Adya & Kaiser, 2005; "Computer clubs attract girls into careers in information technology," 2007). CWC is one way to help change this situation in New Zealand.

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