

# Professor quits in disgust over pass-mark pressure

by Simon Collins

Academics are pushed into giving pass marks to incompetent students and have no time for research, says the co-editor of an international economic journal who has quit New Zealand in disgust.

Professor Peter Earl, a British-born economist who co-edits the *Journal of Economic Psychology*, has taken a new job at the University of Queensland after 10 years at Lincoln University.

Professor Earl said the funding crisis led NZ universities to enrol students who could not learn at the level required.

Yet if he refused to pass them, he was reprimanded because the university needed to keep "bums on seats."

"If you do submit low average scores, the academic registrar automatically asks you to justify that," he said.

"I was bumping them up two grades at the bottom end compared with what I would think they should get.

"The top end were very good. They would hold their own anywhere.

"But students with 'C' grades I simply wouldn't take seriously as having got anything out of uni-



**Peter Earl**

versity. They really should not have been there. They were really only low 'Ds' in many cases." University of Auckland figures show that there were 18.4 students per academic staff member in NZ universities in 1998, compared with 11.2 at Australia's eight leading universities.

Professor Earl said he was forced to use graduate students as tutors but was not confident that all of them were up to the job.

"Everything was being done on a shoestring," he said.

Most students did not read anything beyond their textbooks. When he checked with the library, he found that only one student out of a class of 150 had borrowed any of the books on the reading list.

Most could not write essays, and in final exams would often "dry up after one page or so."

Their mathematical skills were "dreadful." Yet, Professor Earl said, Lincoln took basic

mathematics out of the required core for its commerce degree in the week before he left last month.

He told the *Herald* from Brisbane that his teaching load at Lincoln forced him to merely pretend to do research.

"I very rapidly realised that there was not going to be time to read anything," he said.

"The only way to keep the research up was to become an entrepreneur, editing books that other people were writing and keeping an eye on the literature through them.

"I think that is pretty much a common experience for NZ academics because of the staff-student ratios."

At the University of Queensland he joins another former Lincoln economist, Dr Jason Potts, who boosted his salary by \$15,000 when he moved two years ago.

Both Dr Potts and Professor Earl said New Zealand could lift its economy, and its ability to fund tertiary education, if it accepted more immigrants.

Dr Potts, a world leader in the new field of "evolutionary economics," believes that economies are more like living organisms than machines and thrive on diversity.