

# Life's on hold for sacked academic

## 'Damage to free speech irreparable'

### EDUCATION

By LISA SEWELL

Sacked University of Wollongong academic Ted Steele feels that his life has turned into something akin to a zany Monty Python skit.

The former associate professor of microbiology at the university was dismissed in February after sparking national debate about marking procedures at universities.

He has since been at the centre of a Federal Court battle between the university and the National Tertiary Education Union. Last month the court ruled that his dismissal was in breach of the university's enterprise agreement.

However, university management is trying to appeal the decision - which has again left the 52-year-old in a state of limbo.

"I read about my life in the newspapers, which often know what's happening before I do," Dr Steele said yesterday.

"Sometimes it's a bit like a skit from Monty Python or Fawlty Towers and I think that the ability to laugh about the situation is often what keeps you going.

"Then reality hits and you realise it's not such a laughing matter - it's actually quite a devastating blow at 52 to find yourself out of work, especially when you have two teenage boys and a mortgage."

As well as suffering intense public scrutiny, Dr Steele has lost an \$80,000-a-year salary, his biology laboratory, and six months of valuable research time.

He said the real tragedy, however, was that his dismissal had effectively gagged freedom of speech within the academic community.

"I think my instant dismissal has sent fear and shockwaves throughout Australia and has effectively achieved its goal of silencing academics throughout the nation," he said.

"Even with the best case scenario - that I win an appeal - the final wash-up is that the damage to freedom of speech is irreparable because no-one is going to want to go through what I've been through."

This is the second time the outspoken academic has



**IN LIMBO:** Sacked University of Wollongong academic Ted Steele: "I read about my life in the newspapers, which often know what's happening before I do."

Picture: KIRK GILMOUR

found his beliefs under the microscope - his research into the genetic mechanisms of evolution has been the subject of much controversy over the years.

Dr Steele expounded upon the unpopular theory by 19th century French biologist Jean Baptiste de Lamarck that evolution comes through the inheritance of acquired characteristics.

As a research fellow at the

Australian National University, Dr Steele has been able to continue some of his work in the past months with his long-time research partner, Professor Robert Blanden.

He has also kept his research at the forefront of international debate by accepting guest speaker roles at a number of high-profile symposiums, such as the Quantum Applications Symposium in the US in July.

"I've been in the public eye for the past 23 years due to the controversial nature of my research, but I have to say I've never experienced anything like this," he said.

The support of his wife, fellow academic Robyn Lindley, his sons and his friends had been crucial.

"As an isolated person, without the support of family and friends, I couldn't have survived," he said.