

Professor John Overton
Distinguished New Zealand Geographer Award and Medal 2016

Nominated and cited by Professor Warwick Murray, Wellington Branch, Victoria University of Wellington

Citation

John Overton has played a distinctive and influential role in the evolution of New Zealand geography in his distinguished service, outstanding publication record and dedication to teaching. He graduated from the University of Canterbury with a BA in Geography and History in 1976. He went on to gain an MA first class honours at the same institution in 1978 supervised by Eric Pawson - working on the exploration of the Nelson region during the colonial administration. This fascination with exploration was a theme to which he returned and has marked his work subsequently as it has expanded to cover many of the regions of the world and cross a range of sub-disciplines. After gaining a postgraduate qualification in teaching, he gained a prestigious Commonwealth Scholarship to study for a PhD in Geography at the University of Cambridge, graduating in 1983. His doctoral work on Kenya, Africa, represented the initiation of an abiding interest with rural change and development. He has evolved to become a world leader in both of these areas. On returning to New Zealand, John Overton first took up a temporary post as lecturer in geography at Victoria University of Wellington. This was followed by a position for a year at the University of the South Pacific, where the seeds of his great interest and now vast expertise of the Pacific region were first sown. A research position at the Australian National University followed, and it was here that John's talent for publishing his findings found its first head of steam. He returned to Canterbury in 1990 and held a position as lecturer and subsequently senior lecturer until he was appointed – at a young age - Professor of Development Studies at the newly launched Postgraduate Development Studies programme at Massey. This programme was the first of its kind in New Zealand and was later emulated at Victoria and Auckland Universities based in part on the successful model under John Overton's stewardship. In 2007 he took up the position of Director of Postgraduate Development Studies at Victoria which he holds presently.

His teaching has been consistently rated at the highest level and he is considered very highly by his students at all levels. He has won a number of awards in this regard including the 2009 Best Supervisor in the Science Faculty, VUW. He has supervised over sixty Masters theses to completion in human geography and development studies covering a range of topics in locations across the world but with a particular concentration in the Asia Pacific and Pacific Islands. He has examined over 60 doctorates in a wide range of themes and areas. He has supervised 41 PhD students to completion from 1987 until the present at ANU, Massey and Victoria University of Wellington. Many of his students have gone on to significant careers themselves, and numerous development studies graduates are found in Universities, NGOs, and foreign affairs circles around the world. He has an innovative approach to teaching – one of his most popular courses Development Policy is a simulation game which requires students to take the roles of donors, recipients, experts, technocrats, politicians and so on in the negotiation of an appropriate development policy for the invented country Vanua Lima. Many

successful graduates that have taken this course have gone on to design, implement and monitor real development in countries and territories globally.

John Overton has served in various internal senior roles, including Head of School (1999-2002) of the School of People, Environment, and Planning at Massey University and Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor, Humanities and Arts at Massey University (2004-2006). He has played a significant role in external service. He was Secretary (1992-96) and Director (1996-2000) of the Commonwealth Geographic Bureau. He has been a constant member of the steering group of the International Development Studies Network of New Zealand since 1997 and has chaired two biennial conferences on its behalf. He was Vice President of the New Zealand Geographical Society from 2009 to 2011 and served as President 2012-2013 inclusive. He has served as external reviewers, assessor and examiner in many universities across the Asia Pacific and Oceania and beyond. He has also played a role in governmental circles in and beyond this country serving, for example, on numerous advisory and review panels for New Zealand Aid Agencies, as a member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade Evaluation and Research Board and as a facilitator in the area of development and aid policy to Papua New Guinea.

His published work is numerous and spans nearly four decades in some of the most prestigious journals and publishing houses. In total he has published over 150 items. He has been responsible for three edited, two solo authored and one co-authored book. Close to fifty book chapters have been published on a wide range of topics including field research, geographies of wine, geopolitics, geographical techniques and development theory, as well as in his core research interests of rural development, aid and the Pacific Islands. Close to sixty articles have appeared in international scholarly journals. In the late 1980s and 1990s when John Overton worked at USP and ANU there was a significant surge in output including two authored books produced whilst at USP. Articles dealing especially with rural development in the Asia Pacific and Pacific Islands were published in journals including Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography, Journal of Peasant Studies, and The Contemporary Pacific, as well as in New Zealand's two internationally ranked geographic journals – New Zealand Geographer and Pacific Viewpoint (later Asia Pacific Viewpoint). Through the 2000s, due to administrative and service roles output was not as voluminous but of equally high standard including articles in Journal of Geography in Higher Education, Journal of Rural Studies and Progress in Development Studies. A second surge in writing began in the early 2010s and continues to the present. Between 2010 and early 2016 John Overton published 38 articles, and whilst he continued to actively submit and support our own international journals he also published in many in the top ranked scholarly outlets in the geographic field such as Antipode, Geoforum, Globalizations, Geoforum, Agrarian Change and Geographical Journal. In this work he has continued and advanced his reputation in rural change, aid and development, but also solidified his place as one of the top wine geographers in the world. He has also opened and contributed to cutting-edge theoretical debates including that surrounding 'fictive place' and 'neoliberalism' as recent articles in Progress in Human Geography and Progress in Development Studies illustrate.

John has achieved extensively and consistently pushing the discipline of geography and allied sub-disciplines in new directions, opening up new worlds for students and younger geographers at all

levels, engaging with governments and the public and serving his own scholarly community. I suspect there is much left to come.