

Graduation 2013

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Professor Denise Lievesley

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, orator, ladies and gentlemen, it is indeed a great privilege to be conferred with an honorary doctorate at this university, and a great pleasure to return for this splendid ceremony, some 14-15 years since I was here as director of the UK Data Archive.

Most of you, my fellow graduates are just on the threshold of your professional career. May I congratulate you on your achievements, which I'm sure have been the result of much hard work and a fair amount of stress. I also take mine, the opportunity to congratulate your families and your supporters. I know that there's been a lot of sacrifice. It's been a privilege for me to sit in the front row and to see the emotion of so many family members here.

This occasion is an opportunity for mutual reflex on some aspects of my career, in the hope that what I might say may have a little bit of relevance to you, as you take your next big step in your lives. In my seven years here as the Data Archive I learnt to appreciate the importance of data, which paradoxically grows in value the more it's used, unlike most objects which wear out and depreciate over time. I felt privileged to be working in the preservation of data, and making it available for academic research.

During my time here in Colchester, subsequently at the UN and thereafter, I've worked with other countries, helping them to establish national data archive, based on the model pioneered here at Essex. It was a particular pleasure to visit Hong Kong a couple of years ago to progress the debate there about sharing data. In a few weeks' time, I'll be returning to see their new archive, the fruit of discussions we began in the 1990's. Another of my commitments in my Essex years was membership of the advisory board of the British Household Panel Survey, from its inception in 1991. Bringing to the role my experience as a social survey researcher and arguing for methodological rigour. The survey continues to thrive at Essex with the main objective of furthering our understanding of social and economic change at the individual and house hold level in Brittan.

Now, common perception of statistics and statisticians is boring, boring, boring, and the topics of great conversation stopper. That's a shame, because, throughout my career I found endless fascination in the subject. I've never been bored. I found using my statistical expertise for so many diverse purposes really exciting. I am very prone to quote the joke about statisticians however "how do you tell an introvert statistician from an extrovert statistician? – An extrovert statistician looks at other's people shoes when he's talking to them". But I've never been bored. It's been a fantastic life and I do recommend it to the students graduating today. Some indications of this were given in Matthew Woollard's very kind introduction. In my youth I was estimating the number of homeless people in the United Kingdom for a Royal Commission; then I was measuring the level of malnutrition among children in Ethiopia. Just last week I was in Brussels where we were discussing what we do about the fact that companies such as Google and Starbucks trade in one country and pay their tax in a different country, how is that dealt with in national accounts?"

My work in UNESCO focused on enabling countries to build trusted and trustworthy statistical systems so that they could measure progress towards the millennium development goals. Do you know how many of the world's children are not in primary schooling? The figure is 61 million, and that number isn't diminishing fast enough. It's a politically sensitive figure, not least because governments are called to account for their progress or lack of it. If they don't like the message, they challenge the methodology. Or they might refuse to recognise the data because they have a

different target. So they are looking at whether they get all boys in schools rather than all children in schools, or all children of the main ethnic group in schools rather than all children in the country.

Of course to tackle the reduction of this figure, we need to carry out surveys to learn about these children. They are more likely to be rural, poor, living in households with adults who in turn, haven't had any education. We also need to understand why they aren't in school. Perhaps there's no access to schooling. Perhaps the children are careering for animals, working in sweatshops, looking after parents who have AIDS. So we need statistics in order to learn how to correct the situation. Statistics give visibility to the underprivileged, to those on the margins of society. I hope that gives just a little flavour of the passion and excitement which I derive from my work.

In conclusion I wish all our graduates today that they have an as exciting career as I've been privileged to have.