University of Essex

Graduation 2013
Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand Denise Lievesley
Orator: Dr Matthew Woollard

Chancellor, the Senate of the University of Essex has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Professor Denise Lievesley.

Professor Lievesley is one of my predecessors as Director of the UK Data Archive, a post she held at this University between 1991 until 1998. Concurrently she was Professor of Research Methods in the Department of Mathematics.

Many people think of statistics as just being a specialist type of mathematics, but statistics covers all aspects of the life-cycle of data. Over the years Denise has been instrumental in data collection, data organisation, data analysis, data interpretation and data archiving.

Professor Lievesley began her career as an official statistician specialising in survey sampling. She rose to be the head of the sampling branch of the Government Social Survey Division. One of her achievements here was the development of postcode sampling techniques which is still used in many government surveys.

After this she worked in what is now called the National Centre for Social Research where she was in charge of its Methods Centre. In this post her applied research into non-response rates— why people don't respond in surveys—discovered that much of the problem could be put down to the interviewers not arranging convenient moments to visit. Legitimate market researchers who cold-call you today will try and ensure that their call is convenient.

From here she moved to The Hague as Executive Director of the International Statistical Institute, the professional association for statisticians within all fields worldwide. In this executive post she recruited many commercial organisations to the ISI.

In 1991 she came to the University of Essex as the Director of the UK Data Archive, where she vigorously promoted the value of giving access to electronic data for research and teaching purposes, and not just at an aggregate level but also an individual level. She was one of the pioneers of giving access to the by-products of government administrative processes, a subject much in the news recently: in the late 1990s one success under her Directorship was to gain access to anonymised tax records which became a highly used research resource. She also worked with the late Cathy Marsh in making the case to the UK Government for making a sample of anonymised records from the UK Census. These samples (now more than 20 years old) are still used hundreds of times a year, and the most recent successor based on the 2011 census is being finalised as I speak. This is an important legacy.

She enlarged the UK Data Archive dramatically in terms of staff and in terms of scope: spear-heading the move to digital documentation and recognising early the benefits of the internet as a dissemination tool. Denise stood down as Director in late 1997, but the benefits she brought to the Archive through her practical experience in survey methodology still remain.

After a year's sabbatical she became Director of Statistics at UNESCO, where she established its new Institute for Statistics, based first in Paris and then in Montreal. This new Institute was designed to ensure that the highest quality statistical information was collected from as many

countries as possible and was policy-relevant. At the time she made the point that: "Sound policy-making in education is simply not possible without reliable and up-to-date data."

After six years in this role Denise returned to the UK [in 2005] as Chief Executive of the National Health Service Information Centre. This was a particularly challenging job owing in part to the rise of public-private partnerships in government departments. According to the newspapers of the time she left this job under a gagging clause for standing up to the Department of Health. What is clear from the media reports was her unswerving commitment for the highest quality data to be made available and used to inform public policy.

In July 2007 she became a special advisor at the African centre for Statistics of the UN based in Addis Ababa. In this role, she had one of her finest moments visiting a school in Senegal with Kofi Annan. Another moment of which she is also proud was measuring children in rural Ethiopia to determine malnutrition---an excellent example of a statistician in the field.

Denise took up her current role as Head of the School of Social Science and Public Policy at King's College London in October 2009, where she also holds a chair in Social Statistics. This is not just an inward-facing university role: to list all her current external commitments would take much longer than I have got, but two current roles, which I know are close to her heart are chair of the methodology committee of the European Social Survey and her role as the international representative on the Board of the American Statistical Association.

She has held two of the highest offices in the statistical world. From 1999 to 2001 she was the President of the Royal Statistical Society; and from 2007 to 2009 she was President of the International Statistical Institute, being the first woman to hold this office.

Throughout her recent roles she has contributed to the formulation of both national and international policy on both statistics and on evidence-based policy, while remaining active in the development of social research methods and in the ethics of research. Throughout her working life to date, Professor Lievesley has been committed to protecting the integrity of official statistics and to ensure that they remain free from political influence. She has also been a passionate advocate for the development of career paths for those involved in statistical enquiry.

The very strong concern for data quality and the highest ethical standards in statistics and the statistical profession provides very clear threads throughout Professor Lievesley's career so far, and it shows no sign of abating.

…and so, Chancellor, I present to you Professor Denise Lievesley.