

WOMEN IN STATISTICS CONFERENCE: 20.10.2010

Report

The Conference, hosted by the Victoria University's School of Government and held at Victoria University, was well attended with 55 registrations and a number of one-the-day attendees from a range of backgrounds. Statistics New Zealand, the New Zealand Statistics Association, the New Zealand Institute of Mathematics and its Applications (NZIMA), [the Statistics Department and Faculty of Science of Auckland University](#), the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at University of Canterbury and the School of Mathematics, Statistics and Operations Research at Victoria University all provided sponsorship. This covered administrative costs, attendance at the conference and catering (morning and afternoon teas and a light lunch).

Hon Pansy Wong, Minister of Women's Affairs, opened the Conference and enthusiastically promoted the importance of statistics. As well as acknowledging pioneers in gender equity in statistics education she instanced statistics of direct relevance to women, such as the gender pay gap. The Chair for the Conference was Kim Hill who unfortunately was available for the afternoon only. However, she was a lively interjector often providing an alternative perspective and an air of levity. The six speakers presented a range of papers and perspectives designed both to convey information and to stimulate discussion (a full programme is attached).

Professor Natalie Jackson's paper, made parallels between the life of Rita, in the 1983 film 'Educating Rita' (a 26 year old Liverpoolian who enrolled in Britain's Open University in an attempt to improve her situation) and New Zealand women at that time. She made the point that women have increasingly embarked upon further education as their families grew older, showing graphically the gaps between early study and further tertiary education for successive cohorts. However, increasing education and decreasing reproduction has not necessarily advantaged women with the burden of student debt taking longer to pay off with the gender pay gap.

Lisa Davies, discussed the use of statistics to inform Maori development policy focussing on the research behind the Closing the Gaps initiatives in 1998 and 2000 that Maori had poorer outcomes than the rest of the population. She pointed out some of the controversies that arose from this 'deficit-model' and how it led to the concept of Whanau Ora (based on the logic that service delivery was the key impediment to improving Maori outcomes and that the whanau not the individual should be the focus of public policy). She advocated tertiary institutions providing statistics as a core component of qualifications as evidence-based policy would require a growing pool of statisticians.

Sharleen Forbes stressed the importance of visualising data and provided examples from currently available sources including www.worldmapper.org and www.gapminder.org together with a range of tools in current use by national statistics offices. These included population pyramids, a tool for looking within the CPI, and the application of GeoVista software to 2006 Census data in Auckland city. She also cautioned that new ways of looking at available data were often not useful for small populations or when not sure of the data quality.

Megan Clark's talk covered the use of statistics by organisations where a minor statistic can be blown-up by the media to become an item. However, quantification where none is necessary, can be interpreted as attempts to mislead. She warned of the danger of using statistics in isolation and that throwing in numbers to 'authenticate' policy was becoming increasingly common and that the production of

statistics by government agencies was occupying increasing numbers of staff positions.

Jennifer Brown presented some of her statistics research in environmental monitoring of endangered and pest species, both here in NZ and overseas. In a very visual talk she discussed the use of adaptive and spatially balanced sampling in possum monitoring and the estimation of rare and endangered populations (such as the Pyrenees Desman or the Crau Plain grasshopper) or early detection of threats to our biosecurity (such as weeds).

The day was rounded off by Rachael Milicich giving a personal account of how statistics have influenced her life and how they continue to do so. She presented birth, marriages and employment figures at the time of these events in her life and compared them with other time periods. She also discussed her work managing National Accounts and with the Sustainable Development indicators in Statistics New Zealand.

That the attendees enjoyed the day was evidenced by the number who stayed to chat for an hour or so after the conference had formally ended and from the emails since received. A number of requests have already been made for copies of the presentations (including from the Minister of Women's Affairs) and these are available from lu.folau@stats.govt.nz.

I would like to offer my personal thanks to all of the people and organisations that contributed to the success of this conference.

Sharleen Forbes