Commentary: Closing address of the 10th Australian CSEAR Emerging Scholars Colloquium December, 2011, Launceston, Tasmania, Australia.

Jane BROADBENT
Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost of Roehampton University
University of Roehampton
Erasmus House
Roehampton Lane
London, SW15 5PU
UK

I am something of an outsider in the context of CSEAR down under or back home – this is the first time I have attended. So what are my credentials for being here and for commenting on the content of this doctoral colloquium?

First, I am a scholar with something to say and with intellectual curiosity. This is the essential prerequisite for an academic and without it we are nothing. Second, I have a deep interest in the epistemological question of how we develop knowledge of our social world. Third, I have grandchildren and I hope that they will have the opportunity to live out their natural lives and have the opportunity to have their own grandchildren who can also live out their natural lives. To be frank whatever I do to seek to live sustainably is important, but it is more important that the generation that follows me, that is you, not only lives sustainably but finds ways to help others to do this.

I therefore ask the question does what I hear make me optimistic? Well yes and no.

Yes because there are so many of you here today doing good work but this is tempered by a concern. My question is how many of you are asking the questions that will change the world? This Marxian comment crudely suggests it is not enough to understand the world, what is needed to change it.

I wonder if we are all too careful with our scholarship in a world of performance indicators and A* journals. Should we do less 'risk free' work, by this I mean risk free in relation to its scope, simply replicating what has been done before in different time or space? Should we work harder to engage with difficult questions? Are we working hard to work across boundaries and with other disciplines in order to understand how it is that we may build a sustainable and more ethical world that does not
pillage either the natural sources or members of other nations or the disadvantaged in our own society?

Easy to challenge, but harder to do. So what can we do; what are my prescriptions? First let us remember that talking to each other is only one element of what we should be doing. We need to communicate with our students, not necessarily in the context of dedicated courses, but embedded in all we teach. We need to communicate to the general public, practitioners and policy makers. We need to talk to them in a language they will understand whilst not downplaying the complexity of what is a wicked problem. We need therefore to publish widely and communicate across different channels.

We need to talk to different disciplines and seriously address the interaction of science and social science. For example, at my own university the Institute of Primate Tourism is looking at the complex interaction of the need of people to make a living in the context of what might be seen as the nuisance of primates. How to change a way of life of a set of humans whilst giving animals space in a way that does not compromise their environment and way of life, whilst enabling tourists to visit whilst not a degrading everything they wish to see....?

Christine Cooper questioned whether it was possible to measure the environment in order to account for it, even when well intentioned. Does measurement simply do violence to that which it seeks to measure? It is a question that remains unanswered.

The question of whether some approaches to CSR have simply legitimated the bad practice of companies remains unanswered.

In summary the task has been started but the answers remain elusive. There is much to be done, but you are the ones to take on the challenge. If you are to do this, you need to give close consideration to how knowledge can be generated. It is important to be inquisitive and question the questions you are asking. Do not be safe, go beyond description and understanding what is happening, be questioning, be rigorous, consider significant questions and communicate, communicate, communicate and change the world or lose it.