Tribute to Richard Allsop, 2 May 1940 - 19 January 2024

Richard Allsop was convenor of the International Advisory Committee for the International Symposia on Transportation and Traffic Theory for 16 years from 1981. He contributed internationally to transport theory and technology by combining his acute analytical skills with his deep and sympathetic understanding of people. This enabled him to bring academic transport studies to practical application for the benefit of society. He was renowned for his sharp mind, his seminal contributions in academia and practice, and his effectiveness in building professional communities.

Allsop graduated from the University of Cambridge with a first-class degree in mathematics, then achieved distinction in the post-graduate Part III. Following early involvement in transport studies, he chose to pursue this rather than pure mathematics for his career so that he could apply himself more directly to benefit the community. He duly gained his PhD in applicable mathematics from UCL for his research on the optimisation of traffic signal timings, where he was later awarded the higher DSc. Building on this qualification together with his organisational skills, he established and directed the Transport Operations Research Group at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Following this, he returned to UCL in 1976 as professor, where he directed the Centre for Transport Studies for 21 years, continuing as professor and then emeritus after 2005 with great personal commitment to within a few weeks of his death in 2024.

Three themes underlay Allsop’s contributions to transport studies. The first is the substantial benefit that the transport system can bring to the lives of its users and their communities through access to employment, education, healthcare, society, leisure facilities and their other activities. The second is that changes to the provision, management and regulation of transport systems should be beneficial to the community as a whole without causing substantial unmitigated disadvantage to any of its members. The third theme is that in evaluating the design and implementation of any interventions to transport systems, the likely response of travellers and others affected by them should be considered. Allsop summarised these themes in his inaugural lecture as professor at UCL, which he entitled “Transport Studies and the Quality of Life”, and contributed analytical methodology and exemplars to them throughout his career.

Amongst Allsop’s early contributions was a statistical analysis of case-comparison survey data from Grand Rapids, Michigan on the role of the drinking driver in traffic collisions. His methodical work on this provided quantitative evidence used to support the strengthening of UK drink-drive legislation in 1967. His interest in this topic persisted throughout his career, on which he argued for a reduction of the legal limit for driving, reasoned around consideration of the likely influence on different segments of the driving population and the effect that this would have on casualty rates. Other road safety topics on which he contributed included safety helmets for motorcycle riders, seatbelts for car occupants, speed limits, daylight saving time, and the design of urban networks. The topic of road safety and governmental policy relevant to it remained central to Allsop’s interests, and he wrote extensively in support of realistic national targets for road casualty reduction together with approaches to achieve them. In pursuit of this, he took leading roles with the influential UK Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (PACTS) and European Transport Safety Council (ETSC), which he continued throughout the remainder of his life.

Reconciling the many benefits conferred to communities and their members by a well-functioning transport system with the possible detrimental effects that it could have on its users and others became a recurrent theme in Allsop’s work. This consideration is crucial in assessing changes in performance resulting from a proposed intervention and hence in its design. Instances that Allsop explored in depth included changes in route choice in response to changes in traffic signal timings and the consequent variations in flows in a network, through which he made early contributions to the topic of
equilibrium network design. Developing this concept into the context of urban traffic management\textsuperscript{[10]}, he designed\textsuperscript{[11]} experimental investigation of hierarchical configuration for road networks to provide effectively for travel whilst fostering safe and peaceful areas for residence, commerce and leisure. The findings of this contributed to guidelines for practitioners\textsuperscript{[12, 13]} that were promoted by professional institutions. Allsop’s analysis\textsuperscript{[14]} of the consequences of a political intervention to reduce prices for use of public transport in London for road safety that resulted from responses in modal usage was based on observational data, revealing benefits in this domain.

His curriculum design, lecturing and research supervision were effective in capturing and developing the interest of students from a wide range of disciplines, recruiting many of them to academic and professional careers. During his appointments at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and at UCL, Allsop engaged wholeheartedly with other universities across the UK and abroad. Beyond academia, he helped to establish a new qualification for transport professionals. When engaging with students, colleagues and peers, Allsop explored their interests and levels of knowledge so that he could formulate advice to them tactfully with the effect that it was welcomed and accepted widely. Research students and fellows supervised by him benefitted from his well-balanced advice and guidance, alongside his encouragement to explore and develop both intellectually and personally.

Allsop’s strong interest in international activities and their organisation was reflected at an early age in committee membership of his school’s United Nations Society. He developed this association at his college, representing it at the Cambridge University United Nations Association for which he was also business secretary. He served as his college organiser for War on Want and secretary of the Refugee Adoption Group. In his professional career, Allsop’s international perspective led him to accept visiting fellowships abroad, including at universities in Karlsruhe, Osaka, Christchurch NZ and Brisbane. These initiated further technical exchange visits for research and lectures, and contact with transport professionals in more than 20 countries that spanned five continents. His ensuing advice to academics, governments and practitioners on road safety influenced research, policy and practice worldwide, notably on road safety\textsuperscript{[15]}. In reciprocating, he ensured that visitors to the Centre for Transport Studies coming from around the world were welcomed warmly and integrated into the academic community there. Following a chance encounter with a German counterpart, Allsop drew on his linguistic abilities to initiate a series of annual seminars on technical English for academic colleagues in German universities, which later extended participation to other German-speaking countries and led to the production of a bilingual technical dictionary\textsuperscript{[16]}.

Allsop had a notable ability to assimilate and summarise leading methodologies in transport studies. After establishing an innovative parallel computing centre for transport studies at UCL, he collected contributions on transport applications of this emerging approach\textsuperscript{[17]}. Amongst his own contributions on analytical methodologies and design, he contributed insightful reviews on signal-controlled\textsuperscript{[18]} and roundabout\textsuperscript{[19]} road junctions, and network models\textsuperscript{[20]}. As a reflection of his leadership in scientific transport studies, and his organisational and technical contributions to the symposia, in 1981 Allsop became the second convenor of the International Advisory Committee for the International Symposia on Transportation and Traffic Theory. He continued in this role for 16 years, effectively ensuring the continuity of purpose for the symposium series and its recognition as the world-leading forum for research in transport studies. During this term, he sought to maintain the wide international membership of the IAC and the resulting representation of research in the symposia.

Allsop was fellow of several professional institutions involved in engineering, transport and statistics. The importance of his work and contributions was recognised widely, leading to his appointment as honorary professor in Krakow and Moscow, and many prestigious awards. These included election as Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering (1996), award of the OBE for services to traffic management and road safety (1997), the Highways and Transportation Award for Professional Distinction (1997), election as Fellow of UCL (2000), the Prince Michael Road Safety Award for his
report on the safety benefits of automated speed enforcement (2011) and the Kometani-Sasaki Award for contribution to the International Symposia on Transportation and Traffic Theory (2018).

For those who met and worked with Allsop, his thoughtful approach and kindly offered but nevertheless keen advice set him apart. His ability to understand diversely held views together with his interpersonal skills enabled him to resolve tensions in a way that helped colleagues to concur gracefully. A close colleague once commented that people found it difficult to argue with each other when Allsop was present. The benefits of his work extended beyond his colleagues and those whom he met to members of the public whose safety and wellbeing were paramount in Allsop’s considerations. He will be missed greatly by his family, friends, colleagues and students, but especially so by his wife Frances who survives him.

References


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