

Transport Studies

Professor Glenn Lyons, Chairman, Universities' Transport Study Group

Anyone who has seen their career path take an academic turn and enter into the realms of 'transport studies' may well, like me, have enjoyed the sense of rich diversity that lies within. In my own case, life in higher education began with a degree in civil engineering. My early tastes of transport concerned the design of roads and optimisation of traffic signals. A PhD drew me further in – examining motorway driving behaviour using artificial intelligence. As a postdoctoral researcher I found myself in the world of 'Intelligent Transport Systems'. In the intervening years the path I have followed has taken me into human behaviour and choicemaking, attitudes and social practices. The company I keep has expanded to include psychologists, sociologists and geographers alongside engineers and computer scientists.

Transport studies embraces a broad church and this is reflective of how transport as a sector and in terms of its significance to society has evolved. In my own mind I see transport studies in terms of three eras that have emerged and which now co-exist. The first I call *creation of the asset* – this is the development and maintenance of the transport infrastructure and the vehicles that run upon it. This is very much about engineering, science and technology. The second I refer to as *management of the asset*. This concerns getting as much efficiency as possible from the transport system operation – maximising the throughput of vehicles or people, minimising delay, pollution and energy consumption etc. This incorporates mathematical modelling, operational research, computer science, chemistry and physics (to name but a few) into the disciplinary mix. The third I term *responsible use of the asset*. Here I am referring to two things. Firstly, with burgeoning amounts of (motorised) travel has come congestion and crowding as the transport system capacity struggles to cope – there is a need for demand management. Secondly, there is a realisation that transport does more than simply serve society – it shapes society as indeed society shapes transport. Accordingly our transport asset should be used in ways that *support* the sort of society we wish to have. This third era, in terms of passenger transport, requires a greater understanding of the social context of travel and of human behaviour and how to influence this – further additions to the disciplinary mix of transport studies then include cognitive and social psychology, sociology, human geography, urban planning, public health and economics.

It becomes increasingly difficult to define transport studies. At the same time, the importance of transport to the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of society seems greater than ever. How do we harness the diversity of the field and bring together the capacity of our academic institutions to provide the insight and knowledge that can guide and support policymakers and practitioners in the pursuit of a sustainable transport system? An organisation that plays a key part in answering this is UTSG – the Universities Transport Study Group.

UTSG was initiated by the late Professor Reuben Smeed of University College London in 1967 (his entry on Wikipedia can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reuben_Smeed). It aims to promote transport research and teaching and to act as a focus for those involved in these activities in universities and institutions of higher education in the UK and Ireland. Member institutions (of which there are over 50) are expected to be conducting a substantial amount of postgraduate research in the field of transport. Because such activities are often spread over several departments, each institution appoints a correspondent to disseminate and collate information: in this way over 100 departments are involved in UTSG's activities. Membership of UTSG is free and all positions on its elected executive committee are honorary (I have the great privilege of being its current Chairman). In addition to the membership from the UK and Ireland, over 70 academic institutions are represented on its list of overseas correspondents.

While it may be an insurmountable challenge to comprehensively define transport studies, I would venture to suggest that the collective activities of UTSG members are what, at any given point in time, constitute the scope of contemporary transport studies. It would be easy to imagine a diffuse and fragmented coverage of transport studies within academia given its broad scope. However, UTSG creates a binding influence and a

sense of unification. One of the key activities of the Group is its annual conference which typically brings together well over 100 delegates from across its membership to exchange news of latest research findings. This helps create connections between the disciplines within transport studies and also nourishes the strength of the academic network itself. The conference is also a forum to encourage and support younger researchers – especially PhD students: our investment in the future. 2008 saw UTSG celebrate its 40th annual conference.

Another important function of UTSG is providing a gateway for those outside academia to be able to access the substantial resource of knowledge and expertise embodied within the UTSG community. Two online mechanisms support this. The UTSG website (www.uts.net) provides full contact details for all of the member institutions. It also provides access to a number of annual reports produced by some of the institutions. These reports offer insights into the composition and research coverage of teams working in transport studies. Meanwhile a UTSG email announcements list is open to anyone to join and puts academics, practitioners and policymakers in touch with one another – both within the UK and overseas. The list can be found at <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/uts/html> and has nearly 1000 people subscribed to it.

Further to this, UTSG aims to ensure major research sponsors and professional institutions are able to engage in dialogue and information exchange with the transport studies community. In recent years professional institutions such as The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport and the Royal Town Planning Institute have attended the annual conference. In October 2008 I will Chair a meeting between representatives of the UTSG community and research funding organisations such as the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, the Economic and Social Research Council, the Department for Transport, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government. It seems self-evident that we continue to need high quality research oriented towards the needs of policy concerns and such meetings are a valuable communication point.

The UTSG community also encompasses the provision of taught courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels as well as courses for continuing professional development that cater for the needs of the profession. Such courses benefit from the insights our members gain from their latest research ensuring that not only are the core building blocks of learning provided but that contemporary thinking and debate is available and encouraged.

If you have any questions, queries or ideas concerning UTSG then we would be pleased to hear from you. Please direct these in the first instance to the Honorary Secretary (Dr Erel Avineri, email: secretary@uts.net).

This article was published in Local Government Executive, August/September 2008, Volume 32, Number 4.