



Remembering Allan Gibb: A pioneer in the field of small business and entrepreneurship

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Professor Allan Gibb helped establish small business and entrepreneurship as an academic subject in universities across the United Kingdom and Europe. He built an international reputation in the field, contributed to key policy and practitioner developments and established one of the leading enterprise development centres in the United Kingdom. He passed away in December 2019. This short memoriam considers his impact and legacy, and celebrates his contribution to the field.

Introduction

In 1965, Allan moved from the Economist Intelligence Unit in London back to the North East of England, his place of birth, to become a Research Associate and then Fellow in the newly established Business School at the University of Durham. In 1971, he established the Small Business Centre as a unit dedicated to the owner-managed small firm. This decision came out of a detailed review of the North East regional economy, in which Allan concluded that the only viable, long-term strategy for sustainable development for that region was encouragement of enterprise, particularly through support for and stimulation of new business start-ups. Initially, the Centre was funded by 16 local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and a University Grants Committee award.

One of Allan's first decisions was to second himself into a local garage and car dealership. Accounts vary as to the nature of this engagement, but it had a very clear impact on Allan, for whom the experience was formative, in the sense of learning about the world of the owner-manager and how this world was very different to that of the government policymaker or university academic.

From 1971 to 1999, Allan led the Small Business Centre (SBC), initially as Director and then in the early 1990s Chairman. Over that period, the SBC became a leading small business and enterprise centre in the United Kingdom and Europe. By the 1990s, when the Financial Times started to rank Business Schools, Durham University Business School (DUBS) was described as a leading centre for small business growth in these league tables. Members of the SBC have since gone on to work in the United Kingdom and internationally, contributing to the development of small business and entrepreneurship as an academic discipline in many universities. Many in the DUBS SBC 'diaspora' moved on to practitioner and policy careers in private and public entities such as the Department for International Development (DfID), the World Bank and policy bodies such as the National Centre for Entrepreneurship in Education in the United Kingdom.

On retiring in 2000, Allan stayed on as Chair of the SBC's successor – the Foundation for SME Development – until its absorption back into the Business School in 2003. He also forged a successful career as a consultant to multiple organisations, notably the Soros Open Society Institute, and was a key adviser to the National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship (NCGE), which Entrepreneurial University Leader Programme (EULP). EULP has become a major development programme for university leaders across the United Kingdom and beyond. He received

the Queen's Award for Enterprise in 2009 and the first European Entrepreneurship Education Award in 2012.

Over this period, Allan also published a wide range of academic, policy and practitioner-focused outputs. He was part of a group – alongside Sue Birley and Jim Curran and others – who established small business, which later evolved into the sub-discipline of entrepreneurship, as an area of academic research and teaching. Allan's contributions were extensive and can be framed in terms of the following themes.

The Small Business Centre: academic enterprise and capacity-building

Between 1971 and 1999, when it was established as a separate department within Durham University, the SBC grew to become an international centre in small business and enterprise development. By the late 1990s, more than 40 staff worked in the Centre, making it one of the largest small business and enterprise units in any university. SBC staff provided management development and training programmes for owner-managers, banks, business support agencies and intermediaries, and government departments and ministries. The SBC also undertook advisory and policy development projects, including policy analysis and advice and capacity-building, both in the UK and internationally. Commissioned research created an evidence base for the SBC from its early days of operation. By the mid-1990s, hundreds of owner-managers a year participated in development programmes offered by the SBC at Durham, and both the business start-up and growth programmes had been licenced or transferred to universities and agencies globally. By that time, more than a thousand bank managers and around 70% of Business Link Personal Business Advisers had been trained in working with small businesses. The SBC also undertook international enterprise development training, with many participants travelling to Durham from all over the world.

The SBC was made up of a series of small units. Each unit operated with a distinctive focus on a customer (e.g. the small business) or an issue (e.g. how to make younger people more enterprising). These were self-supporting, generating sufficient income to cover costs and a surplus contribution to SBC overheads. This represented a key design principle espoused by Allan: that the SBC should be entrepreneurial in the way it operated and the primary means of doing this was to set it up as a group of autonomous units focused on a key client group. The external orientation of these units meant that they focused on the challenges and life-worlds of key stakeholders. These units focused on the following: enterprise education; graduate enterprise, owner-managed small businesses; medium-sized enterprises; the small business support network; international enterprise development with a focus on emerging economies especially South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa; transition economies in Central and Eastern Europe; enterprise policy research.

Key contributions and themes in Allan's work

The SBC provided an important operating and transactional environment for Allan, its founder, key designer and enabler. Each of the units represented a research focus, or set of questions for Allan, and this is reflected in his publications and the following key foci in his work.

A focus on small business development

Allan's early publications focused mainly on the small business, and in particular two key stages of its development, namely start-up and growth. These contributions emerged from the practitioner work of the SBC. One of Allan's earliest papers was on the new venture creation process (Gibb and

Ritchie, 1982). It emerged from the Shell Build Your Business award, run by the Centre in the late 1970s. The Gibb and Ritchie start-up model captured Allan's approach for much of his published work; of engaging in a practitioner activity, in this case encouraging graduates to be enterprising; and then converting this into academic output. It was a powerful and durable contribution for many reasons. It brought the idea of process transition into the literature at a time when much of it was seeking to map the world of enterprise and understand it from established paradigms. It was scalable, in the sense that it could be personalised to the individual and could also be lifted to a group or population. And it was useable. The start-up process was quickly developed into the business start-up training programme that has since been replicated worldwide.

Publications with Mike Scott and Les Davies (Gibb and Davies, 1990; Gibb and Scott, 1985) were codifications of the SBC experience of running 'The Growth Programme' for small business owner-managers. The programme was based on the framework presented in Gibb and Scott (1985). Allan's work on small business growth, in practice first and then through publication, was quickly translated into growth programmes across UK business schools and then internationally. The programme helped many entrepreneurs to grow their businesses, in the same way that the start-up model helped founders to start their own ventures.

The importance of enterprise culture and education

The concept of enterprise culture, and its articulation into a more clearly defined (and therefore better understood) framework and set of components was a theme through many of Allan's publications (e.g. Gibb, 1993a). Allan initially conceived of enterprise as a set of attributes or behaviours that could be applied to, and developed through, owner-management of small businesses. Small businesses lacked market power and resources, and so were dependent on key transactional relationships and their management, creating conditions of uncertainty, vulnerability and volatility. These features of the small business required, and developed, enterprising capabilities. As a result, the small business represented a heightened organisational context for entrepreneurial learning and the development of enterprising capabilities and so was key to the emergence of an enterprise culture (Gibb, 1993a).

However, Allan did not limit the development and exercise of enterprise to small businesses. He proposed that individuals can be enterprising in many contexts, both in work and beyond, and that these capabilities enhanced the prospects of successful outcomes if applied to a task or challenge. Experiential learning enabled the development of enterprising capabilities and was a milieu in which individuals could exercise entrepreneurial behaviours and become more enterprising through their application. Enterprise culture as a result emerged when conditions enabled and encouraged such learning and development of capabilities.

Allan's focus on enterprise education was sparked by an interest in how schools taught young people and the effects this had on their ability to be enterprising. Being enterprising represented a way of challenging hierarchies and social constraints that could suppress the potential of young people to express themselves, be creative and shape their own futures. It also provided a framework to develop enterprising attributes in young people. Enterprise culture – an environment that enabled/disabled and endorsed/suppressed enterprising behaviours – is shaped by an education system that can be hostile, or at least sceptical, towards enterprise, especially when framed in the entrepreneurial context of business start-up.

Entrepreneurial learning

Small businesses, particularly their owner-managers, were considered by Allan to be a heightened context for learning, and becoming more enterprising as a result (Gibb, 1997). Undertaking all

tasks in a new or small business, facing uncertainty, generating know-who through relationships with suppliers, customers and stakeholders, managing ambiguity and developing teams were seen as fertile ground for experiential learning. Having control over the business and workplace enabled application and development of enterprising capabilities.

Over time, Allan's notions of enterprise became less associated with being a small business owner-manager, and increasingly became a set of attributes that could be applied in multiple contexts, including university leadership (e.g. Gibb, 2005). At the heart of this was the way individuals responded to, coped with and embraced uncertainty. Thus, entrepreneurial learning enables individuals to not only cope with and manage uncertainty, but also to thrive in and even enjoy these conditions. When considered reflectively, this suggests that being enterprising can be personally challenging (and stressful), even if outcomes are positive.

Capacity-building in universities

Allan's conceptualisation of entrepreneurial learning underpinned his support for the development of enterprise programmes for academics and practitioners, as well as university leaders. He contributed actively to the European Foundation for Management Development's Entrepreneurship Training Programme (ETP), which ran through the 1990s and into the early 2000s. He was centrally involved in the development of the National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship's (NCGE's) International Enterprise Educators' Programme (IEEP) and as NCGE became NCEE the launch of the Entrepreneurial University Leaders' Programme (EULP).

Allan was also heavily involved in developing the academic infrastructure for enterprise in the United Kingdom and Europe during his career. He was actively engaged in the development of the UK small business research conference network that ultimately became the Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship (ISBE), with the first conference held in Durham at DUBS in 1978 and the 20th anniversary in 1998 also hosted by the SBC in Durham. He was involved in the establishment of the European Council for Small Business (ECSB) and was highly active in the European Foundation for Management Development (efmd), establishing its small business chapter and supporting its annual conference.

Developing the network capability of small business 'support'

In the 1970s, Allan and colleagues at the SBC established Enterprise North, through which owner-managers volunteered to support other owner-managers by mentoring. Over time, this approach to counselling owner-managers brought about the establishment of enterprise agencies, such as EnTrust and the County Durham network of agencies, and ultimately around 250 agencies across the United Kingdom by the mid-1990s. Allan was closely involved in their development and in ensuring the SBC was centrally involved in developing 'training the trainers' programmes and awards, such as the PG Certificate in Business Counselling. These experiences, of creating locally embedded institutions within a national network, led to an ongoing engagement with what has been termed the business support network as well as with policy. Allan's Order of the British Empire (OBE) honour was attributed to development of the national enterprise agency network. With colleagues across the SBC, Allan went on to work closely with the Manpower Services Commission, Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), Business Link and other agencies in a series of initiatives to develop SMEs and their growth potential. Allan and others in the Centre also undertook policy research for the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and successor ministries in the United Kingdom, and increasingly counterparts globally. Allan worked closely with senior civil servants and ministers

throughout his career, in the United Kingdom and overseas. For example, he contributed to the establishment of DG Enterprise in the European Commission, and was chair of the small business group set up to contribute to New Labour's first Competitiveness White Paper.

Over time, donor agencies and governments in emerging economies sought input and expertise from the SBC and Allan, leading to a transfer of the start-up and growth programmes to many countries in the 'South' and on to projects to develop enterprise policy, business support agencies and programmes internationally. This led to close engagement with multiple international agencies, including, for example, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) around start-up training; Cedefop around competency standards for training the trainers of small businesses; and DfID and other donor agencies around institutional development and micro- and small enterprise programmes in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and other regions.

After retiring from Durham University in 2000 (he maintained a link for the first few years after that with the Foundation for SME Development, the successor entity to the Small Business Centre), Allan undertook consultancy, gave lectures and presentations, and became increasingly involved in the creation of IEEP and UELP, through NCGE and then the National Council for Enterprise Education (NCEE). IEEP extended a long tradition of building capacity in enterprise in universities. He also continued publishing, increasingly with a focus on challenging Business Schools and Universities to be more enterprising and more engaged in the entrepreneurial world.

Allan's approach

Through his career, several patterns and themes emerged, which captured Allan's approach and the reasons for its success. Key ones are highlighted below.

Understanding and engaging in the world of the owner-manager Scott

A typical starting point for Allan's research, for example, on graduate enterprise, start-up and growth, was to explore and better understand the world of the entrepreneur. This approach was framed by his time seconded into Craven Motors which gave him a direct experience of working in an owner-managed business. This convinced Allan that policy research and design should be framed by the world and problems, issues and experiences of the owner-manager. His focus on this world was of significant value to policymakers who tended to be distant from the small businesses for which policy was being designed.

Allan was constructively critical, and often challenging, of what he used to call the 'supply-side' system of small business support (and he was not a fan of the word support, as he saw this as somewhat patronising). He advocated making these supply-side entities more enterprising themselves, and so more able to engage the owner-manager and work with small businesses from a position of empathy and understanding. He helped the Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership (CEML), for example, understand that the key to effective small business 'support' was 'joining the owner-manager in their world' and not seeking to re-design small businesses to fit the desires or preferences of policymakers and business support organisations or to converge with the corporate world of larger businesses.

Process, policy, practice as 'organising logics'

Much of Allan's work mapped out and used processes of enterprise formation or change as the conceptual framework underpinning programmes and papers. A process perspective captured transitions and evolutions in enterprise and small business development. The Gibb and Ritchie (1982)

start-up model is a transition process that breaks down new venture creation into sequential (sometimes simultaneous) steps towards launch of a business. Gibb and Scott (1985) and Gibb and Davies (1990) published a three stage growth model that became the framework for the DUBS Growth Programme. These process insights were then developed into practice through development programmes for small businesses and for support organisations, and the experiential insights and learning were codified and communicated to policymakers as recommendations and proposed designs for enterprise development support systems and institutions.

Focusing on 'impact'

Allan's work focused firmly on its impact on small businesses, entrepreneurs and enterprise development institutions. Research became part of a process to inform design of frameworks, programmes and other interventions that were designed to enable enterprise. Allan developed the Research/Develop/Test/Disseminate model, which applied research to a problem or issue experienced by an owner-manager or (potentially) enterprising person. The aim was to ground research in practice and then deploy the findings to design and test programmes for delivery. These would then be disseminated through programme transfer and via engagement with policymakers. In this way, Allan can be considered an early pioneer of what later became described as 'impact' in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and by Research Councils, trusts such as Wellcome, and international research initiatives. Allan's approach was recognised in Durham University's 2014 REF submission in business and management, in which two of the five impact case studies were based on Allan's work and the practices of the SBC and the 30-year history of the Centre.

The importance of place

Context was a concern and focus of Allan. His original motivation for establishing the SBC emerged from the study he undertook on the economic structure of the North East of England. Enterprise North, the enterprise agencies and the Growth and other small business development programmes were all run in the North East year-on-year. Over time, the North East of England became a development 'lab' for programme development and the design of new initiatives by the SBC.

However, Allan was sensitive to and highly aware that enterprise manifested itself differently by geography and cultural context. Work, for example, in China (Gibb and Li, 2003) and Ghana (Gibb and Manu, 1990), as well as in Central and Eastern Europe (Gibb, 1993b; Gibb and Haas, 1996), was driven by a concern to tailor inputs and interventions to the particular institutional and cultural circumstances of countries and locations. Allan undertook international enterprise development through a contextualised lens and his work on enterprise culture emphasised variations in context-specific enterprise cultures in different places and organisations (e.g. Gibb, 2000).

Social and personal dimensions: from know-who to kindness

Allan's approach to enterprise was highly personalised, and as a result focused on the individual. The personal played strongly through Allan's work, most consistently and notably through his focus on 'know-who' as more important than 'know-what' (e.g. Gibb, 1996). When running a small business, 'who you know' was in Allan's view and experience more important than the accumulation of formal knowledge, and small business success was based on effective relationship management. 'Know-who' and the arising needs to manage key stakeholder relationships became a core concept in many SBC programmes, and notably underpinned the small business relationship banking programmes for banks (along with other concepts such as dynamic financial analysis).

More broadly, Allan never lost sight of the individuals at the heart of the small business. Each growth or firmstart programme explored the individual stories of owner-managers, and recognised the personal rewards and challenges of starting and running your own business. Story-telling and dramaturgy became important methods to humanise the entrepreneurial experience within owner-manager programmes and capacity-building initiatives such as the University Entrepreneurial Leaders' Programme.

Putting the person at the heart of the endeavour could be seen in his approach to managing the SBC – where he was highly interactive, worked closely with all members without differentiating by job or role, and created a workplace that was highly committed and also fun. He had a personal interest in those working in and with the SBC throughout, and brought many people into his own home and life during his career. When coming back into work after an international visit or other time away, Allan was as likely to be talking first to the porters and kitchen staff as to anybody else, and consistently stressed that they were the most important people for the SBC and all who visited or engaged with it. Hierarchy was of no personal interest, but recognising contribution and commitment most certainly was. It is no surprise that one of his last contributions was on kindness, a characteristic and value that informed his work and behaviour throughout his life (Haskins et al., 2018).

Allan Gibb 20 November 1939 – 21 December 2019

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