



James (Jim) Curran Obituary

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Professor James (Jim) Curran passed away recently after a long and distinguished career in the field of small business and entrepreneurship. He was founder of Kingston University Business School's Small Business Research Centre in 1987. On his retirement in 1996, he was given the title of Professor Emeritus by Kingston University, and was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, British Academy of Management and Institute of Small Business and Entrepreneurship. Jim was a very creative researcher, generating ideas from key academic concepts, as well as engaging with contemporary societal, economic and policy concerns. During an extensive career, Jim's research output was prolific as was his influence on those he worked with. He raised the quality of work in the field and helped it attain the respect it now holds in business and management more generally.

In his early academic career, Jim met John Stanworth with whom he formed a close academic relationship that lasted the best part of three decades. In 1973 they wrote *Management Motivation in the Smaller Business* and then proceeded to publish in the fields of entrepreneurship, business growth, entrepreneurial training and franchising. Their output was considerable, producing seminal articles such as 'Growth and the Small Firm – an alternative view' in *Journal of Management Studies* in 1976, highlighting the different motivations and social processes involved in small firm development. Similarly, their article 'Colas, burgers, shakes, and shirkers: Towards a sociological model of franchising in the market economy', in the *Journal of Business Venturing* in 1999, demonstrated original thinking and an ability to produce a convincing argument in an engaging writing style.

During his career, Jim wrote and co-authored dozens of books, book chapters, learned journal articles, newspaper and magazine articles, research reports and reviews. He presented over 70 conference papers and public lectures in the United Kingdom and abroad. Jim also played a pivotal role in the foundation and development of the *International Small Business Journal*. In 1982, the inaugural volume of the Journal, published by Clive Woodcock, carried a lead article 'The Small Firm in Britain – Past, Present and Future' by Jim and John; and Jim also held the key role of Reviews and Abstracts Editor.

As Director of the Kingston Business School's Small Business Research Centre, he appointed Robert Blackburn who he mentored to ultimately succeed him as head of the Centre. They, in turn, were extremely productive until Jim's formal retirement, publishing extensively and laying down the foundations for a highly influential group of researchers. Winning the funding for the ESRC research centre on small firms in the services sector in 1989 was an important underpinning to these foundations. Jim was very proud of this achievement with his research team, as well as being part of the wider ESRC initiative led by David Storey and thus, the community more broadly. This certainly helped bring small firms and entrepreneurship into the mainstream and stimulated a wider diaspora of researchers, many of whom now hold senior positions in academia.

Despite his prominent role in the academic community, including membership of the executive of ISBA (now the Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship) and member of the 1996 Research Assessment Exercise sub-panel, with responsibility for entrepreneurship and small firms,

Jim was, in many ways, a humble man. He was incredibly resourceful and demonstrated a roll-up sleeves attitude, keen to be involved in all stages of the research process. In debate, however, Jim was tenacious. He would hold to task other senior academics, constantly trying to improve the quality of research through his incisive critiques and ideas for development. Jim also recognised the practical significance of research many years before impact became a buzzword in academia. He would try to persuade those in practice, such as the most recent minister for small firms and civil servants, often pointing out flaws in their arguments or deficiencies in their research evidence and latest policy initiative. Yet, Jim was very caring, generously spending hours with junior staff or newcomers to the field – as many will attest through his research student supervisions, examinations and exchanges at conferences, seminars and workshops. Jim always helped those who needed it most, possibly reflecting his own background, avoiding the trappings of power often associated with senior professors, or becoming slavish to the latest academic fashion.

Jim's background and life journey to becoming a leading academic was unconventional and not easy. Jim grew up in foster care, left school at 15 with no 'O' or 'A' levels, entering catering at the age of 16 when his foster carer died. He completed his National Service in the Royal Air Force in France and Germany in 1957–1959. Having left the airforce, he then studied for 'O' and 'A' levels by correspondence while working as head waiter at a London hotel. He was then encouraged by friends and family to read for an External Degree in Sociology at what is now Kingston University. He completed his PhD at Surrey University in 1978. Jim leaves behind his loving wife Audrey. Jim's hard work, academic integrity and tenacity in driving this new field will be his legacy. The field of small business and entrepreneurship would not be where it is now without Jim's significant influence.

Robert Blackburn and John Stanworth
James Curran 12 April 1936–1 June 2018

