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00:07 - Lauren

Welcome back to Gerrin On Wit' It, hosted on the Research and Innovation podcast at Leeds University Business School. I'm Lauren Cox, the Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership, YPIP, communications and engagement manager.

On this episode, I'll be speaking to Kayleigh Renberg-Fawcett, who is the Place Team Lead for UPEN, which is the University Policy Engagement Network. With over eight years' experience in academic-policy engagement initiatives, she's worked on collaborations between universities, local and combined authorities and national policy bodies to bridge research, knowledge and decision making. Kayleigh and I will be discussing the Yorkshire and Humber Network of Networks initiative, which looks to align the different pieces of academic-policy engagement work happening across the Yorkshire and Humber region. Welcome Kayleigh.

00:53 - Kayleigh

Hi, thanks, Lauren. Nice see you.

00:55 - Lauren

Thanks so much for joining us. So, for those who may, this may be their first introduction to the whole Network of Networks, how would you sum up this initiative?

01:04 - Kayleigh

At its core, the Network of Networks is really about bringing together the different research initiatives across Yorkshire and Humber that are all trying to connect that academic research with regional policy partners and decision makers. So, your local and your combined authorities, but it could also be the NHS Trusts, for instance. And when we realised there was a lot of us working towards this same goal, supporting evidence-informed policy, essentially, but often in quite disconnected ways, we believed it was really important for us to come together. And so, this is really a network about joining those different initiatives up. So, learning from each other, collaborating more strategically, making sure we have a bigger collective impact. Why is that important? Well, if we don't do that, then we run the risk that this kind of work is happening in the region, but in silos. And that can mean that we could be duplicating work. We could be missing opportunities to join up, and ultimately it makes it a bit harder for us to tackle those big and long-term challenges that our region's facing. And also it's tricky for our policy partners to navigate where and who to go to on the academic side in terms of the evidence and the research we are producing. So really, it's about moving from the isolated but really important activity that's happening to a much more joined up and strategic approach across Yorkshire and Humber.

02:35 - Lauren

Sounds fab. Thank you. And was there any particular kind of situation or instance that happened that kind of brought this work about?

02:44 - Kayleigh

Yeah, so it's that's a really good question, Lauren. So, I guess YPERN, which is the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network, was set up to kind of be essentially what I'd call the connective tissue between the universities and the research that's happening across our 12 universities and the connection with the local authorities and combined authorities specifically of which we have 19. By doing some of that initial mapping, so to speak, we discovered that there are many different initiatives that already exist and there were many initiatives also emerging into the space that were also looking to do that join up. So very similar aims around how can research help to inform policy and decision making. So last year in 2025, we worked with those partners and brought them together for the first time so we could all get to understand each other a bit better, um explore those shared challenges and see where we could collaborate. And I should emphasise that this isn't just a YPERN initiative, this is a commitment from all those different networks. So, it's really a collaborative endeavour in the region.

03:56 - Lauren

Amazing. So, you mentioned that you've got all all these different kind of networks operating in this one geography. So, who's involved? What what kind of initiatives are signed up to the Network of Networks?

04:09 - Kayleigh

Yeah, there's ah there's a really wide range of organisations from both universities and our policy partners working on a range of areas such as health, like the Yorkshire Humber Applied Research Collaborative, on data like YPIP, climate, so we have the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission, the economy, which is a big area of work for YPERN, and community engagement alongside other place-based partnerships across the region, like Yorkshire Universities and Yorkshire and Humber Councils. So, I've named a few examples there, but there are many more. And we hope that that list will grow because we recognise that more and more initiatives will continue to evolve in this space over time.

04:53 - Lauren

Great. So, when you brought everybody together last year, what common themes or challenges were identified?

05:00 - Kayleigh

One of the first things we did as a Network of Networks was to identify some of those shared challenges. So that looked like, how can we better connect the research systems that are in our universities that are traditionally focused on just, you know, producing academic publications or drawing funding with our policy needs? So, for instance, in that context, we were looking at Areas of Research Interest. We were also looking at how we actually do that practice of translating the research into policy, something we call Knowledge Mobilisation, which may or may not be familiar to our viewers, but it's something that many of our networks work on. So YPERN works in this space, the Yorkshire and Humber Applied Research Collaborative, the Health Determinant Research Collaborations, UPEN. They're all working at how do we effectively do that bit of engagement. And other examples like community engagement, how can we do that meaningfully and well? And there was also some practical challenges around data sharing. So, where we have initiatives producing locally relevant data, how can we make that accessible to partners beyond that collaboration? And how could we work together to coordinate and collaborate together on future funding bids so that we can continue to build off what we've already learned rather than having to start from scratch. And I think what was really interesting in that first session was that those issues were common across all the networks and we all found that actually these were really important areas for us to work on together.

06:44 - Lauren

Great. So in identifying those kind of commonalities, how have the kind of Network of Networks in the group driving this forward been looking to overcome them? What kind of suggestions or potential solutions came out of bringing everybody together?

07:00 - Kayleigh

Yeah, there's been a there's been a few things. So, I think firstly, we've got a really committed group of people across these networks who are really keen to take this forward and that's super important because actually we're all having to do this on top of our day jobs. A few key areas where we are specifically having focus includes, on Knowledge Mobilisation as I discussed, that key term and that practice we have organisations within the network that are looking at how to translate research into NHS policy, how research is being used effectively within a local authority, how research has been used within a combined authority. So, by bringing all this together, we can start to learn how to do this systematically across the whole of the Yorkshire and Humber and learn from each other's practice.

That's evolved into a community of practice, which we just launched earlier this year. And I can talk a little bit more about that later in terms of how people can get involved. But that will look to meet three to four times a year to sort of bring together that learning. We've also worked and together to surface the work that's been done across our local and combined authorities in developing something called Areas of Research Interest.

So, these are evidence gaps or research gaps that our local policy partners have identified as something where they'd like research to help fill. And so we've seen these organically grow across the region, which is fantastic because that's rooted in what those authorities have identified as needs.

But the opportunity here is then for us to say, well, there's a particular evidence gap in North Yorkshire, which is very similar to what we see in South Yorkshire. How can we connect those two conversations together so we can bring academic expertise across the region?

And that's a really exciting piece of work that's developing. We've also started to look at joint funding applications together and additional things like around how we strengthen our shared communication. So, as you know Lauren very well, when we articulate what each of our networks does to our policy partners, they can often feel a little bit overwhelmed and think, well, hang on a minute. There's already something here with a Yorkshire and Humber name. Who do we go to for what? And I think what we want to do is reassure them, it doesn't matter who you go to because behind the scenes, we're all connected and joined up. So, if your request comes to Y-PERN, but we actually think the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission would be well placed to answer that question, we help do that behind the scenes wiring for our policy partners.

And so, we've got quite a nice value proposition to them in terms of accessing the evidence. So, I guess a big part of the work really has been moving that conversation that we had last year into tangible action.

09:59 - Lauren

Great. So you mentioned that like with the community of practice and other pieces of work that that are kind of developing and evolving. And you mentioned that there's some things that people might be able to get involved in. Do you want to share a bit more about that?

10:12 - Kayleigh

Yeah, definitely. So there there are various ways people can get involved. And I think, first of all, if you feel as though you're part of Yorkshire and Humber research-policy engagement network and you haven't been involved to date, just get in touch with with any of us. We'd love to hear from you. And then I guess in terms of tangible events that are coming up over the next few months, so we do have our Yorkshire and Humber Knowledge Mobilisation Community of Practice. The next event will be in June online and there should be two more this year, which will have a focus on drawing out case studies of how researchers, policy practitioners, knowledge mobilisers, have worked together to effectively and influence policy through research findings, but also to help create that space for networking, which we know is really important for many of our members across the region.

We've also got an Areas of Research Interest conference coming up in Huddersfield, and that will be advertised shortly. It's due to take place just before the summer.

And then we're also due to have a wider Network of Networks catch up and get together. So, bringing together those different work strands, those people working on the Areas of Research Interest, on the Knowledge Mobilisation work, on data, on the funding, on the communications, on community engagement, back together to say, look, this is where we've got to.

13:12.82

Kayleigh

um So i'd I suggest the best way to kind of stay up to date and and find out how to get involved in those things is keep an eye out on Y-PERN's LinkedIn and newsletter, but equally keep an eye out on the communications channels for for all our partners.

So specifically, Y-PERN, Yorkshire Universities, Yorkshire and Humber Applied Research Collaborative. We'll all be advertising these opportunities across our different platforms to our different networks.

So, yeah, would be great to hear and and encourage other people to join.

12:10 - Lauren

Great. That sounds like a lot of stuff coming up that that people can get involved in. um I just wanted to pick your brains as um Gerrin' On Wit' It is all about kind of collaboration, and particularly in the region. But obviously, um people have experience from from previous lives and roles potentially outside of that.

What do you think about how could collaboration become business as usual, rather than kind of an ad hoc practice? What's the special ingredients, I guess, that makes this work?

12:42 - Kayleigh

Mm-hmm. Yeah, it's a good question and it's one we all want to do, but the day-to-day realities of our day jobs can sometimes mean it can be a little bit tricky. But I think we have to incentivise collaboration in order for it to be, in order for it to work and not for it to be seen as extra. We've got many challenges across our region and we won't effectively be able to tackle them alone. They're often system-wide issues. So, I think that will force us to work together. But I also think really important, and I think this is what the Network of Networks and is really all about. It's about building on what already exists or has existed rather than constantly starting from scratch. And that then encourages us to go and reach out to people and understand, well, what have you done in this space? What can we learn from you? What existed before that was funded but finished for whatever reason? um but that worked.

And so I think if we can build in that time, often when we're looking to address a particular challenge or problem at the start, that's a really good opportunity to bring in different perspectives, different voices, different experiences to contribute to that.

And I also think it's really important that we make sure that the value of engaging with academia is really clear to our policy partners.

And I don't think there is um that clear articulation at the moment or that clear grounding. It's something within the University's Policy Engagement Network we're particularly interested in looking at. How do we support our policy partners to understand that really rich menu of options for engaging with universities that can range from anything from a research project to a knowledge exchange event

to a fellowship, that can really enhance that collaboration so I think for there that's that's specifically around I guess how research and policy partners can work together but I think understanding that value is is really important to help build in that buying capacity and for it to be prioritised within our policy partners and not seen as ah simply as a nice to have to collaborate with your universities.

So, yeah, I think those are my my three key takeaways. It needs to be business as usual and then built into how incentivised to work.

It's about building on what's already exists or has existed. And it's about being able to really articulate that value to our partners clearly, so they get it and they proactively reach out to to work with us.

15:26 - Lauren

Thanks, Kayleigh. That's really helpful, that kind of summing up in the three takeaways. Just going back to your point around incentivising and kind of what well what needs to come underneath, I guess, all of your your takeaways. So, what what do you think kind of um governance, you've obviously mentioned the Network of Networks that's trying to build that opportunity to connect with others that are doing similar things that align with yourselves. So, what kind of foundations of of governance or resource are needed to incentivise this work, like you said, and to ultimately sustain it?

16:02 - Kayleigh

As you mentioned, we do have this Network of Networks governance structure, which has both the strategic and operational groups underpinning it. um but a real big challenge around all of this is the sustainability, because a lot of our work is funded in relatively short cycles.

And also a lot of our work, a lot of these initiatives are funded primarily on at a university level or it might be a policy level.

There's very rarely the opportunity where investments are made with equal distribution between partners.

And that's normally due to the funders terms rather than that being the intention. So, we're relying quite a bit at the moment on committed individuals, which isn't a long-term solution.

So, what we really need is that permanent infrastructure, something that can hold the knowledge, the relationships, the learning over time. The way I sometimes think about it is a bit like a bicycle wheel. You've got lots of spokes, different projects and initiatives, but you need a strong hub in the centre to hold it all together. And in Yorkshire and Humber that's definitely what we're working towards, is developing that hub, because we know we'll have will continue to bring in brilliant investment into the region, um but what we need is something for those investments to dock into so we can create that institutional memory, legacy, collective capacity. And so that when people come and go on projects, there is something for them to dock into.

17:47 - Lauren

Yeah, thank you. I really love your points around the kind of knowing what's gone before and understanding what what was successful, but wasn't able to fully sustain itself because of, you know, short term funding um and maybe changes to personnel um or, you know, political directions, funding directions change. So, yeah, that that kind of um long standing hub base for all of this is definitely the way the way forward, and that institutional memory is key to not keep rehashing the same initiatives, same ideas as when you're trying to engage with with partners.

They have seen it all before sometimes, so you want you want to not be on the back foot with these things and be sure to to come with sensible and and valuable ideas for the different audiences. um Well, thank you so much, Kayleigh, for all your contributions today. I'm really looking forward to see the Yorkshire and Humber Network of Networks work evolve. um And yeah, really hoping that our listeners get in touch with the different partners and add value to this great piece of work.

18:57 - Kayleigh

Thanks, Lauren. And yes, looking forward to hearing from our listeners in due course as well and welcome them to join the YH networks.