

Research and Innovation Podcast: “Gerrin’ on wi’ it” series

Episode 2: Harnessing diverse research capabilities across 12 universities for a Yorkshire shared mission

Speakers: Andy Mycock and Peter O’Brien

[00:00:03] **Lauren:** Welcome back to “Gerrin’ on wi’ it” - a podcast series brought to you by Y-PERN and Y-PIP, hosted on the Research and Innovation Podcast. On this episode, you're tuning into Dr Andy Mycock, chatting with Dr Peter O'Brien about how collaborations between Yorkshire Universities, councils, and communities are shaping the region's future in building trust and planning for challenges and opportunities ahead.

Check out the show notes for helpful links and explanations of terms used within the conversation. Enjoy.

[00:00:34] **Andy:** Hello, and welcome to the latest episode of Gerrin’ On Wi’ It. I'm Dr Andy Mycock. I'm the Chief Policy Fellow for the Yorkshire and Humber Policy and Engagement Research Network. I'm also the cross-programme Lead for the University Policy Engagement Network. Today we are joined by Dr Peter O'Brien, Yorkshire Universities Executive Director. Peter leads Yorkshire Universities’ executive team and has over two decades of experience, both as a senior practitioner and an academic. Peter, hi - welcome to the podcast.

[00:01:05] **Peter:** Hi, Andy. Nice to be here.

[00:01:07] **Andy:** I wonder if you could start maybe by just saying a little bit more about the innovative work of Yorkshire Universities across the region and how it supports collaboration.

[00:01:18] **Peter:** Yeah, so, we're a partnership of 12 higher education institutions and universities in Yorkshire of different sizes, shapes, forms - so that's quite unique in terms of bringing together different sorts of universities and mission group institutions. Our focus is on place. It's on the region's economy, society, and environment, and we're very deliberate about that, and our strategy sets out how we do that in collaboration with our policy partners such as Mayors, mayoral combined authorities, local authorities. So, I think we've been quite instrumental in trying to shape the higher education sector nationally and thinking about the importance of regions and the importance of place.

[00:02:04] **Andy:** In some ways, Yorkshire Universities is fundamentally based on the idea of collaboration and I wonder whether you could say a little bit about what collaboration means to you. You know, what is it and what are its benefits?

[00:02:19] **Peter:** So, collaboration for me has to be driven by a sense of purpose, a sense of direction, an understanding about what our assets are in terms of our members and their capacities and their capabilities, what they're good at, what perhaps they don't do. And in order to then sort of make a tangible difference, I think, to people's lives, you know, the communities, the businesses in Yorkshire, then try to kind of pull together those different elements of what our universities are good at. And therefore, articulate how they fit together as part of a package or a wider sort of ecosystem. Once you have an understanding of that direction of travel and that kind of baseline, I think you then have a basis for driving collaboration forward. It's not always easy - it takes a lot of intense work. I've worked in partnership roles throughout my

career. I think they're hugely rewarding when they are successful, but I do think they need to be built on trust, on a demonstration of added value, and of course, very much about being inclusive. So, all of our members have got a contribution to play in terms of thinking about how they collaborate together and in particular, collaborate with business, industry, communities, and government at all levels.

[00:03:42] **Andy:** And what are your experiences of working with universities of different size and composition? The Yorkshire and Humber region is blessed with multiple universities, but they're not uniform or monochrome in what they do and how they're organised.

[00:03:59] **Peter:** No, they're not at all. And in some ways that's hugely beneficial and positive because it means we've got that variety and that diversity that we could draw upon. On the other hand, it's also at times a bit of a challenge. You know, we can't take for granted that a very large research intensive university will always be able to see that Yorkshire Universities and what we do is right at the top of their list of their priorities. They engage with and work with all sorts of companies, and institutions and leaders regionally, nationally, and internationally. So, for us, we need to make sure that we're very, very good at communication, that we are articulating both when we are co-designing, say, initiatives with our members about the value of what it is we're trying to do, what we would like our universities to work on individually and collectively, and then continually without bombarding very busy people with lots of information, but make our communications as effective and as sharp as possible. So actually things like this, Andy, this podcast is hugely important I think, in articulating that value that we bring to our leaders, our Vice Chancellors, all different parts of the university system. So, yes, we have to be very flexible. We have to adapt. We've got to know our customer base if you like, our members, and we've got to make sure that communications is at the heart of everything we do.

[00:05:30] **Andy:** I think in some ways I have to say that my current position within Y-PERN is down to the work of Yorkshire Universities and yourself because much of this work and also that the Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership are founded on the innovative Memorandum of Understanding that Yorkshire Universities signed with Yorkshire and Humber Councils in 2021. I wonder if you'd like to say just a little bit about how that work evolved and how it came to signing that Memorandum of Understanding.

[00:06:03] **Peter:** Yeah. So it appeared and emerged in a post pandemic or post lockdown environment. It was very much to the credit of particular institutional leaders like Kersten England, the former Chief Executive of Bradford Council, and Shirley Congdon, who was then the Vice Chancellor of University of Bradford, but was the chair also of Yorkshire Universities, myself and other colleagues on the local authority side, working with those two leaders and actually saying, "you know, what could we do better together strategically?" Systemically, Devolution was in its, dare I say, infancy in the region. There was a lot of appetite to perhaps build upon some of the innovations that had taken place during those first days of the lockdown and hugely challenging of course, but the region and other places across the country did pull together in order to, you know, try and achieve success or deliver for a common purpose. And I think there was a feeling that Yorkshire actually does work collaboratively at that regional scale.

Perhaps there's something that we can pull our different assets and capabilities together as local government, as what were the Mayoral combined authorities ahead of the Mayoral elections and also universities. So, I think there was an appetite to basically, you know, be very,

structured in what we were doing together to drop on that great work that was already happening, but to somehow coordinate it better and make it a little bit more efficient. And I think importantly to convey that we could provide a voice for the region nationally. So, I remember the first piece of work we did was, you remember the phrase Andy “Levelling Up” Uh, we responded to the “Levelling Up” white paper. We published a, a joint statement and that was our kind of our basis for saying look, these are the things that higher education, through our work on innovation, on skills, working with students and graduates businesses equally local authorities as place makers and place shapers, could work together to perhaps, you know, deliver on what was then the government's objectives around levelling up. So, I think the MOU has been hugely important to us. Very successful, we can be even more ambitious with it. And, I'm really pleased to hear, you know, leaders in both YU - Yorkshire Universities and in local government really grasping the net and saying, “look, we can do more to, to make this MOU even more successful.”

[00:08:37] **Andy:** It's been a remarkable journey since that Memorandum of Understanding has been signed in terms of collaboration, and Yorkshire Universities has been at the heart of that collaboration. I wonder if there's any particular examples of collaborative work and its impact that maybe stand out for you since the MOU was signed.

[00:08:58] **Peter:** I think very practically, Andy, you mentioned it in your opening, or in your remarks around the question of collaboration and it's the Y-PERN programme and YPIP and all other related academic policy engagement work. I don't think those would have materialized without the MOU. I think the MOU gave us the basis to go to senior leaders. But equally, and I think this is where this has been very innovative in Yorkshire, get leadership buy-in for what we were trying to do collectively through the MOU. And an example of that was how do we harness, bring together our different research capabilities for policy engagement. But actually we had the academic buy-in as well, and the academics were absolutely instrumental in pulling the propositions together for Y-PERN and YPIP. Those two things have been very practical and I think a demonstration of intent and other regions look at what we do, and want to learn from us equally, I think we can learn from them, but I would point towards the Y-PERN and YPIP programmes as being hugely successful and I hope they've got an enduring legacy and sustainability.

[00:10:13] **Andy:** So in part it's that building of a sort of collective or shared mission for the region that's at the core of this. And I, I wonder to what extent, you know, in the success of the work of Yorkshire Universities, the importance of building relationships and building trust has been to driving this work forward.

[00:10:37] **Peter:** Yeah, without trust, without I guess an understanding that all 12 of our member institutions, universities have a stake in YU, but equally we are not you know, attached directly to one of them. You know, that's a strength in some ways. You know, we can be seen as an independent broker in many respects. But we can't do this work without building that trust at all levels without absolutely relentlessly focusing on the added value that we bring. You know, universities in our region are members of different groups who do different things, you know, whether it's Universities UK or the Russell Group or University Alliance or the N8 or White Rose Consortium, you know, what is it that's distinct and adds value from a YU perspective?

I think we've found that, and I think what we then do is say, look, this is where we can add value. The devolution agenda, Andy, which you know really well, and obviously you've done a huge

amount of research and, and commentary upon, has given I think a further catalyst to our kind of work as a basis for collaboration. And so, I think, you know, that for me has been really instrumental in taking our collaborative work and partnership work within our membership, but with policy makers to the next level.

[00:11:53] **Andy:** I think one of the things I have noticed is that, you know, the region has in the past sometimes struggled to speak with a, a collective voice and a shared vision. And the work that Yorkshire Universities have done, particularly with Yorkshire Councils and the APPG for Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire has started to see the idea of that collective shared voice and vision become something which is projected, not just across the region, but nationally as well. But in some ways, I'm interested to hear your thoughts on, you know, how has collaboration in the region shifted from being something which is rather ad hoc to being business as usual.

[00:12:39] **Peter:** Yeah I think if you are situated outside Yorkshire and you look into, or you look at what Yorkshire is doing, particularly in the space of devolution, of collaboration for economic development, you might think it's, or you may have thought it's somewhat quirky and kind of, slightly, you know, peculiar, in the context of thinking that, you know, devolution is all about city regions, but actually Yorkshire is built upon places like, you know, the urban centres, but also the rural areas and the coastal areas. What actually binds them together is their sense of strong identity. And I think that's really important around saying, well, what is, what is the basis for, um, a shared purpose, shared agendas and actually making the case for Yorkshire. I think the Yorkshire Mayor's working collaborative together, as well as Yorkshire Humber Councils, has been very instrumental in that collaboration being seen as the norm rather than the exception.

[00:13:42] **Andy:** In some ways, I think what has been key to the success of the work that Yorkshire Universities has led has been that beyond the relational dimensions of this work, about that building of trust through personal relationships, there's been an approach which is focused on connecting government at different levels, building networks across different stakeholders, and also making sure that the resources that are required to build this work have been available. I just wonder whether you might have any thoughts about how can we address the challenge of sustaining in this work and also making sure that it grows and evolves in the future?

[00:14:26] **Peter:** Yeah, as always, you know, we're working within very straightened and difficult financial times for all parts of public sector and universities. You know, we know, and unfortunately, you know, many of our colleagues are experiencing the difficulties there. However, I do think, you know, if we are committed to grow the economy in a sustainable and inclusive way, if we are wanting to make people's lives more prosperous and create new opportunities we need the best interventions and the best evidence and data and insights and ideas about how we will support those particular priorities. That requires, I think, our academic research capability, which is world class across, you know, the 12 universities to contribute in a particular way. And I was quite struck, you know, this week, you know, we've seen the Government launch Northern Powerhouse Rail. You know, Yorkshire is first in that northern powerhouse rail infrastructure programme. Principally because the Mayors have come together and had a very clear evidence-based plan for what it is that's needed in terms of connectivity. That's a demonstration of Yorkshire working collaboratively together using the best research and knowledge. So I'm optimistic, Andy. I think there's a basis that our leaders can see the value of what we do and what in particular Y-PERN and YPIP do and I'm hopeful that we can

find a way to continue and expand on that work because ultimately if universities are really serious about being civic institutions, working with communities, working with their regions and places. This is a fantastic example of how they do that. They use their research, they work jointly with communities, they come up with ideas and solutions. I think I want to see more of that.

[00:16:19] **Andy:** I think you're right, that value of collaboration is really starting to materialize in different ways. I suspect a difficult question, but one you might want to consider is, is there anything that you might do differently in the future? Thinking about the lessons learned from this initial phase where, you know, collaboration has moved into a much more organised approach across the York and the Humber.

[00:16:45] **Peter:** Yeah. I mentioned earlier about communications for Yorkshire Universities, for YU, and probably one of the things I would suggest and maybe we could take forward as a collective that works in the Y-PERN and YPIP space is probably, we would've got that communications capability in right at the outset. And it's in there now and it's doing fantastic work, but we probably could have and should have found a way to bring it in in sooner and to probably lay the ground for what it is we were trying to do there. Now these are still, I think, pilot programmes. We're still learning from them. The evaluations are hugely important. That's not a sense of the programmes failing at all. It's just learning the lessons from them. And for me, communications - and by communications, I'm not the simply talking about some social media posts as important as they are - but I think the kind of work and innovative work that YPIP has done with communities, you know, working with communities, that type of communication and I would think if we were doing this again in terms of funded programmes we'd probably look to see how do we bring that comms expertise capability in right at the outset.

[00:17:59] **Andy:** That's really interesting. Just as a final question, really: the term "trailblazer" is often used to describe particular Combined Authorities across England, and yet I've always been struck by the idea that Yorkshire and Humber is a trailblazer region in terms of collaboration, bringing together the universities, connecting the combined authorities and local authorities in a way, which I think has been distinctive and unique and has been very much about that part of England. The regional identity that's underpinned it has been deeply important, and I'm just wondering, Yorkshire Universities resonates both on a regional scale, on a national scale and international - you are involved in a number of national projects that are looking to enhance policy engagement and the role of universities in civic life. What are the next steps for Yorkshire Universities? Where does the journey go in the future in terms of encouraging further collaboration?

[00:18:59] **Peter:** So there is a wider policy environment and canvas that we're working within or is at least informing our work. We have had the government publish a post 16 education and skills White Paper that makes it very clear that the government wishes to see more collaboration, particularly more collaboration at a regional scale. It also wants to see more specialism. You know, we can have a debate probably separately to this podcast about whether there are sufficient inducements, incentives, interventions that will enable those two particular objectives to be met. But I can see certainly the direction of travel moving more towards even greater collaboration.

I think the risk is, and the challenge is - we want the sector to remain cohesive. I talked about different types of universities and there are different mission groups that represent nationally,

different types of universities, and they do, you know, a fantastic job for their members when it comes to about what goes on in a locality, and you know, Andy, I'm an economic geographer. I'm a geographer. Place matters, you know, things happen on the ground. I think you do need that blend of different type of university and ensuring that the sector remains cohesive, united is up for greater collaboration rather than more competition, I think is, is going to be both an opportunity but also perhaps a challenge. And I think, you know, we've got to be aware of that and we've got to make sure that at a leadership level, you know, they are taking this seriously, which I know they are. But I think if you were to ask a Mayor, or a local authority leader or, you know, a Chief Executive of a major company, they would say they're not particularly that interested in the input side, they want to know, can higher education help create an environment where their businesses flourish, their places are, are productive and prosper and are, you know, a socially kind of cohesive. That's what we need to think about the role of universities in the economy and in place because ultimately a lot of taxpayers' money is underwriting this sector, you know, all of our money in effect.

And I think there is a, a responsibility on the higher education sector to say, what does it do for the The UK and what do we do in Yorkshire for our region? And I think we can point towards some brilliant stuff that we do, but I think there's an expectation that we need to do probably even more.

[00:21:35] **Andy:** Well, I think you're right Peter. I think there are some significant challenges, but there are huge opportunities and the role of Yorkshire Universities has already been proven in terms of how it can enhance the value of collaboration, how it can encourage more collaboration thank you very much for spending the time today to come and talk about the journey so far.

Thank you very much for listening and goodbye.