

Placecast Episode. 16 - Transcript

[00:00:06] **Nicola Headlam:** Welcome to Placecast, a Local Policy Innovation Partnership Hub production based at the University of Birmingham. Placecast is essential listening for those keen to explore the ins and outs of knowledge mobilisation for influence through central and local government. Based on the view that it's only through animating the power of place-based leadership, the wicked problems of 2026 can become more manageable.

[00:00:28] **Nicola Headlam:** Whether you're a researcher, citizen scientist, an activist, a professional working within the public sector, a civil servant, politician, analyst, or entrepreneur, we think that it's through our networks that most solutions can be assembled, tested, and the learning shared before we go again, and that universities can act as the repositories and observatories of these efforts.

[00:00:48] **Nicola Headlam:** We're based in City-REDI and rooted in the LPIP program funded by the ESRC, AHRC, and Innovate UK. This podcast aims to highlight knowledge and evidence-based ways of working and the strategies needed to make a real impact on the decisions that shape our society. Our guests are change-makers from across the UK with stories about the ways in which influence can be achieved.

[00:01:10] **Nicola Headlam:** We focus in particular on some of the connective tissue within and between sectors for clues as to how to animate place-based leadership, as innovating is a team sport best done in the open. Please contact us with feedback on the episodes or if you'd like to be a guest or have strong views on the processes of advocacy, lobbying, public campaigning, and more, unpacking how research and evidence connect with neighbourhood, local, city, regional, and national missions.

[00:01:39] **Nicola Headlam:** In this episode of PlaceCast, Rebecca Riley is joined by Dr Conor O'Carroll, Director of SciPol Services and a leading figure in European research centers and higher education policy, - for a wide-ranging conversation about what it takes to build research systems that truly work for people and places.

[00:01:57] **Nicola Headlam:** Drawing on Conor's long-standing involvement in the European Charter for Researchers and major reforms to research assessment and doctoral training, the discussion explores why traditional academic career models no longer fit today's innovation landscape and what needs to change to support mobility, engagement, and impact beyond the university walls.

[00:02:17] **Nicola Headlam:** Together, they consider how skills recognition, reformed incentives, and stronger place-based partnerships can better connect universities, researchers, and local economies, making the case for research careers that are more flexible and grounded in societal need.

[00:02:33]

[00:02:39] **Bec Riley:** Hi, I'm Bec Riley, and I'm the principal investigator of the LPIP Hub. and I'm really happy to have today with us Conor O'Carroll, who I've worked with for, a number of years around, working in higher education, developing good research, and what makes, uh, a good research approach.

[00:02:57] **Bec Riley:** Dr. Conor O'Carroll is Director of SciPol Services Limited. As an independent consultant on research and higher education policy and funding, he focuses on researchers' career development with special attention to doctoral education and career assessment. He started his career as a physicist, graduating from University College Dublin with BSc and MSc, and did a PhD in Italy at the University of Pavia and European Joint Research Centre, IPSRA.

[00:03:26] **Bec Riley:** Learned Italian, cooking, and skiing, along with some physics. Worked as a physicist in Scotland, Germany, and then made a career shift to research funding in the European Commission, Brussels. Belgium does have the best beers. Back to Ireland and working for national funders and universities representative body, set up his own consultancy business 10 years ago.

[00:03:49] **Bec Riley:** He's a lead assessor for the EC Human Resource Excellence in Research Award and has worked on the revision of the European Researchers Charter and Code. He's led European policy initiatives on open science and doctoral training, such as the development

of the European Innovative Doctoral Training Principles and the European Framework for Research Careers.

[00:04:10] **Bec Riley:** He's an active researcher on national and European research policy, R&D, higher education, and researcher mobility policy, and is an accomplished commentator on R&D and higher education policy and funding. Recently, he led a year-long study on implementing the new European Charter for Researchers with 16 countries.

[00:04:29] **Bec Riley:** You're most associated with the European Charter for Researchers. Can you tell me how you became engaged in this work?

[00:04:36] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Well, thanks, Bec, and it's actually an interesting pathway how I got there because the charter itself is about a basic European policy for what is what we can consider a single market for the freedom of movement of researchers and knowledge.

[00:04:52] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Initially, my, let's say my calling or my vocation was in physics and mathematics, and I was mobile because I was a student in Italy, in the University of Pavia, and in the European Commission's Joint Research Centre up north on the lakes near Switzerland. I was a postdoc in Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, and then I worked as a scientist in Germany.

[00:05:13] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** So, I had moved around Europe and, um, I must say from a personal point of view, it was a great experience because not least the work, but also the cultural experience of living in different countries. I did make a, career shift at one point where I switched from research in physics to program management with the European Commission in Brussels, and this was involved in running, in fact, the fellowship program for the commissions, what's now known as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowships.

[00:05:41] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And part of that was, um, was certainly involved in policy. And then when I moved back to Ireland back in '98, I was working with our national funding agencies and then subsequently with our universities. And in all that period then, I became an Irish representative for the country on European research policy, and that's really what got me embedded in this whole area.

[00:06:03] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** I was involved in the charter you mentioned was published. It was a, let's say, a revision of the original charter that was originally published in 2005 during the time of the UK presidency in London. And I was then involved most recently in this new one. And this was quite interesting because it was looking back at how it had been developed in 2005.

[00:06:24] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** That was pretty robust still, but we had to include new things around research integrity with a greater focus on research ethics, on how to assess research better, and in particular assessing researchers, and I think we're gonna come back to that later. And far greater recognition of the need for interaction between the academic and the non-academic world, and that's, I think, a fundamental point of this.

[00:06:49] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And this is, in fact, now what's interesting is this is part of a much broader European career framework, which is looking towards supporting and developing researchers for careers, not just in academia, but indeed in the private sector, but also in the public sector, and working far more with citizens than has been done so in the past.

[00:07:09] **Bec Riley:** Thank you for that. Given the LPIP's focus on place level partnerships and collaboration, that point about the academic being closer to policy, and others, how do you think what you've learned would be useful for university partnerships at that local level?

[00:07:27] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** The first thing probably I would say is that in a way, you've got to look back look at the PhD itself, the pathway from, let's say, from the undergraduate to the postgraduate to the researcher.

[00:07:38] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And there is a fundamental problem with the PhD in that it is no longer really fit for purpose in its traditional form, and that is of effectively an academic apprenticeship. when you look back in time, you see how at one point, yes, the, the, the PhD was pretty much a track into academia.

[00:07:59] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** But probably you could see the change in this in the early 1950s when the US started making large investment in research. And this, of course, followed... The rest of the world started doing

it, Europe, the UK, et cetera. I mean, UK was always a leader in, in research, but it was this increase in volume which was so significant.

[00:08:18] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Despite the fact that more than 50% of PhD graduates immediately will leave academia, and then when people go on to postdocs, many of them will leave as well, only a fraction remain in the academic environment. Nonetheless, people still want to do... In fact, successive surveys of PhD students say, "Well, what do you want to do afterwards?"

[00:08:40] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And the answer is, "I want to be an academic," which is simply not practical nor possible for them. But that's hard because their focus has been on this. And changing the approach to how people are trained, how people are, educated during the PhD will make a fundamental difference for placements, and that's where the charter itself can come in.

[00:09:03] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** I would like to say, of course, is that the-- there is an important point that this is not to denigrate the PhD because, in fact, PhD graduates have one of the lowest unemployment rates of any other graduate. It's always less than around 2%. They usually don't end up where they thought they might, but they do always end up in pretty rewarding careers.

[00:09:23] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Now, the two things I'd like to, I'd, I'd like to focus on, coming back to the core of your question there about how this would benefit partnerships, is that, um, one of the major reforms that's been taking place, and it's probably for the last four or five years really, is the reform of research assessment across Europe.

[00:09:41] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And this has been a collective effort with the European Commission, but also what's most important, with all the major funding agencies across Europe, including, uh, UKRI and, CNRS in France, uh, the DFG in Germany. So all the big funders have got right behind this. And the core of this, the idea is that currently, as a researcher, if you apply for a grant, if you apply for a job, if you're in a university and you're looking for a promotion, everything is pretty much based on the single metric of your publication record. It's very narrow. It's very focused. And of course, that drives practice by researchers into that narrow area. The reform of research assessment is to turn this completely on its head

and recognise, and indeed reward, the fact that researchers themselves do an awful lot more than this.

[00:10:33] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** If you look at somebody typical, look at yourself in a university, you lead research teams. You are involved in developing skills of interacting with people outside of academia. You're managing projects. I mean, these are all the things that people, that, that researchers do, but often, they're not recognised.

[00:10:52] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** They're not recognised as being particularly important, certainly in recruitment and career development. and most importantly as well, experience of people involved, for example, in placements, is usually under-rewarded in the sense that if they are in placements in outside bodies, outside of the university, they're probably not going to have the same, impact in terms of their publications as if they stuck to a, a very pure academic approach.

[00:11:18] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And this, again, has consequences for them for their career. So it does push people away from those. Now, what has changed is that the major funders in Europe are slowly but surely, because it is like turning an oil tanker, they are moving away from the traditional approach and looking far more towards this type of assessment.

[00:11:37] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And I know that many funders now actually assess far more other qualities in their researchers, including the impact of their research, the impact of their work, not just in the academic sector, but in the non-academic sector. And really, a change like this, uh, once this gets properly mainstreamed, it would see that researchers would see their value of all of these skills that they have as part of their career development.

[00:12:04] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And it would also for them, provide them a better channel or a better access for people in the non-academic organisations into universities. Because vice versa, people who try to come from outside of the universities to get jobs in universities often find it harder because they don't have that academic background.

[00:12:27] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** The second thing in this is around skills, and I mentioned that already. But it is how these are structured and organised, how they are trained, how they are delivered is something which

is, let's say, a bit piecemeal. the European Commission has developed a tool called The Research Competence Framework, which actually is very like the UK, the Vitae Research Development Framework, where it allows researchers to self-assess their skills, to identify what directions they want to go in and identify the skills they need. And this is for research, not just a PhD, but right up to senior level.

[00:13:03] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And it's part of a whole movement, again, with funders and universities to fund more skills training for researchers and have them integrated into career development. the good news is, I mean, there's a lot of this stuff happening already. It's not like this just fell out of the sky.

[00:13:19] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** In fact, the UK, I would say, is a leader in this, because if you go back to 2002, there was the report by Sir Gareth Roberts, But one thing he focused on was postgraduate training for researchers, and this led to funding of postgraduate training in UK universities.

[00:13:35] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And indeed, Vitae is the current evolution of that process. But it exists right across Europe now in terms of structured PhD programs, and probably the biggest one are the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions funded by the European Commission, and they fund doctoral networks.

[00:13:51] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Also, lots and lots of industry-type doctoral programs are around Europe. And interesting from your point of view that there's quite a lot of these involved in the regions, because one thing is that, um... And this is, I mean, this is a big difference from the UK, is where you talk about a region, say the Northeast, the Northwest, whatever, Birmingham and that. In Europe, when you have regions, they actually have a really distinct characteristic, and often they can often be self-governed.

[00:14:19] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** They will have their own budget. So they have a lot more autonomy as small independent states within larger federal states, like in Germany, for example. And what that means is that regions often get heavily involved in these areas. And one would be-- I mean, a good example for me is in the Basque region in northeastern Spain, and there is an agency called Ikerbasque, and they have very good money because they get a lot of money in from industry and non-academic

organisations, because their purpose is to link the academic world far closer with

[00:14:51] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** the non-academic world.

[00:14:52] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** 'th-there's a lot in this that can actually be of value to you in the work that you're doing.

[00:14:57] **Bec Riley:** in terms of our work as the LPIP program, a lot of what we do is try and help people and advise them, on how to develop better partnerships. a lot of that is focussed around things such as what are the operational structures, what are the things that you need in place?

[00:15:14] **Bec Riley:** I'd be interested in your reflections on what the different skill sets, that people need to be able to do these sort of developing these really complex university but place-based partnerships from the work that you've done.

[00:15:28] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** Well, I think that, And this comes back to the, the point I was making there about skills themselves, about the need for people to develop skills and to recognise which ones they need for that. And many of them are around communication skills and learning how to speak different languages. And I I don't mean languages from different countries, but languages from different sectors, because often as not, the language of academia is very much divorced from the language of the non-academic sector, and it's how to translate that in a most effective manner.

[00:16:02] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** And one, thing I think, which has been certainly, and, and again, this is part of, um, European policy, but in many countries as well, is greater engagement of citizens in the process of research and innovation. And that means engaging them, engaging the non-academic partners directly in not just the process of the research itself, but the whole framing of these things from the first instance, is getting that involvement at the very start.

[00:16:28] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** So I think communication is a fundamental skill in this regard, and being able to link and understand the needs, and this works even within the academic environment itself. I've worked with people in, in the life sciences, and I found that we might use the same

words, but they meant completely different things in the physics world and in the life sciences world.

[00:16:50] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And this is, you know, this is doubly so when you move outside of academia. So I think that for me is one of the core, is the core aspect of that. And linked to that, I mean, again, this pushes forward in saying that if you want this to work really well, this ability to do that has got to be recognised and trained within institutions for people to learn those skills, because one can get them to some extent from experience by being dropped into an organisation. But if you want to set up those links on a far more formal level, you need to have those skills a priori. Also, the skills are there to ensure that the funding, that the finances will be in place.

[00:17:28] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Because often organisations, if you're looking at academic and non-academic organisations, they're working on very different, timelines in terms of their funding. So, it's important to make sure that these things can match, and that does require some very good financial planning.

[00:17:47] **Bec Riley:** If people adopted and developed these skills, what do you think would change as the result, and what's the size of the prize in terms of getting people to do it?

[00:17:53] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** I mean, the size of the prize it has a number of different aspects. One is that it is providing value for both sides, for the non-academic and the academic sector, because the non-academic sector can gain the expertise that they will not have from the academic side.

[00:18:10] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** From the academic side, they will have insights into how the, other sectors work, and how they can also use their own skills to provide more expertise and how for that to work better. From a national point of view, it is demonstrating to the government, whether it's local government or a national government, a value for money, because this is always the question that's asked.

[00:18:30] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** You know, "What's the point in funding you lot?"

[00:18:36] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** you are involved in research, but to what purpose and to what value for the country?" Well, this is a really good example of that. And it also provides a far greater pathway and channel for researchers in terms of their careers.

[00:18:47] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** So it really is of high value to both parties in this sense, because both sides gain from this. It's, it really is a win-win situation.

[00:18:55] **Bec Riley:** That's great. And, and actually, it marries up with the experience of, people working in the LPIP network and the benefits that they've seen and their partners. Thinking about solutions, can you describe what needs to change in order to create successful research careers in engagement and impact?

[00:19:13] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Okay. There's a number of things. One is that you need that focus on skills training for researchers to recognise and have those skills to be able to engage in that. The second thing is, non-academic placements as part, for example, of their PhD programs. These can be long-term, these can be dual programs between the non-academic, academic organisation, or they can be short-term placements.

[00:19:38] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** In any case, they're of high value because even in short-term three-month placements, people gain vast experience at understanding how different organisation works. One needs a change in the approach of research funders, for those who are funding research and funding researchers, to recognise that this type of work is valuable, that the skills that they are learning in this process is valuable.

[00:20:01] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** One needs a change in the university's recruitment and, and progression processes. Again, moving away from the purely academic based assessment to something which is more based on, the impact of the research they're carrying out in the non-academic sector. And I think, I mean, a fundamental thing in terms of the PhD is stop treating it as an academic apprenticeship.

[00:20:21] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** It ain't anymore. And, it is foolish for people to continue that approach because it is producing large numbers of graduates who are very good, but will find, a career. But often what's found

now is that there's a, a four to five-year gap where people move into a postdoc or they do something else before they actually find a career.

[00:20:42] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** This would help people fast-tracked into far more meaningful careers. One of the things that's interesting, there's good examples of how these things work, you know, and how they can work effectively. Because I was looking at an example there from the Marie Curie program, and there was a training program for researchers, which was hosted in University College Dublin.

[00:21:06] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** It was in the area of molecular neuroimmunology, which I don't know anything about, but it was hosted in the School of Medicine. And the researchers, they came over to train in some very practical methods. They came from a number of countries, and they, they were all from academic universities in Belgium, Cameroon, Italy, Austria, Poland, France, and Brazil.

[00:21:26] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Now, and I looked at these people, what, what have they done? Where are they now? And looking at them now, they're in Deloitte in Belgium, Lufthansa in Poland, Novartis in Austria, LifeLabs Medical Services in Canada, and Wyss Research Foundation in Switzerland. So these people started off as standard PhD students working in academia.

[00:21:47] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Now they are in companies right across the world, and that is often what happens. But there is a gap, and changing the system would actually mean that people would fast track quicker into that, and it would benefit both parties, benefit the individual researchers, universities, and indeed the non-academic organisations.

[00:22:11] **Bec Riley:** Picking up on that, 'cause the danger is actually that, academia loses the people with the right skills to push further academic working. One of the things that, within the LPIP network which has been really interesting is in terms of City-REDI at the University of Birmingham, we actually follow a lot of the recommendations that you, highlight.

[00:22:32] **Bec Riley:** But I don't think I could have developed a City-REDI and established it in many other universities, partly because University of Birmingham supports a lot of your recommendations, and we've

introduced, a career progression path, which is specifically for impact and engagement, which is the progression route I was on.

[00:22:52] **Bec Riley:** So all the skills that you've mentioned were valued. I also did some work looking at people who were in similar roles to me, and what was interesting is they usually had a very blended background. So they came in, uh, in senior roles within universities, but they had this mix of private sector, public sector, and academia that gave them a lot of those skills that you're, indicating and talking about from your work.

[00:23:23] **Bec Riley:** Which would suggest that actually, within academia, are people coming up through the ranks with those skills, or do we have to buy them in at the end?

[00:23:35] **Bec Riley:** A reflection on that is, what are the characteristics of the careers of people that you've come across, in your work that have built these people that have all the skills that you've mentioned, if you've not got a, a sort of a development track?

[00:23:50] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Well, I think that one of the important things to take into account here is that it very much depends, and it it does very much depend on how people are funded as when they're being trained, let's say, within the research environment, when they're trained as, as PhDs in, in the first instance.

[00:24:07] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And I mean, it's, it, it's typical. You see this right across Europe, that you have two types of PhDs. You've got the ones who come through an individual fellowship, like the Marie Curie Actions or other types of scholarships and that, that are awarded at national level. Or you have people who are hired through large-funded research projects.

[00:24:30] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And in the latter case, the goal is purely to produce research and the knowledge of, let's say, publications, et cetera. That's the goal. That's what they're focussed on, and that's what they're told, "That's your job. You get a PhD out of it, but this is, this is what you're here to do." Whereas in fellowships, in particular, like the Marie Curie Actions, is that, um, when the, fellows are funded, they have a dedicated funding stream within their fellowship, which is focused on training, on career development, on possibilities of placement in non-academic organisations, and funding for conferences.

[00:25:05] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And these have been the things I've seen that have worked extremely well. And you can see it in the careers of people afterwards, because they had effectively a type of protected time to map out what they wanted to do. I've seen it so many times in universities.

[00:25:21] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Your PhD student, they're dropped in it. They're straight into their, into their research. It's only when they're halfway through writing up they start thinking about a job. And often as not, of course, the most obvious one is a postdoc, because that's... Their supervisor is an academic, and they can easily direct them in that way.

[00:25:38] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** So that's one. thing that it really stands out in terms of the type of funding. The second thing, and I think is the point you mentioned about, about Birmingham, and this probably is a a good distinction in types of universities, because you've universities which are traditional of a certain type.

[00:25:53] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** I mean, Birmingham has always had a longstanding link with, I mean, in particular originally in engineering and that, but it has spread out. It's a different approach to, let's say, your traditional, Cambridge and Oxford type university. And we would have the same in Ireland as well, where we have what are the original, the traditional seven universities.

[00:26:12] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And we have what would've been, UK equivalent of polytechs, which recently have become technological universities who have far more links with the outside world, let's say the non-academic world. I would guarantee that people coming through those pathways in Ireland... And I've seen it, I mean, you see it in Germany.

[00:26:31] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Germany with their technical universities in Munich or Berlin or wherever, they have the same pathway for people that come through. They, they come through a system whereby that type of training, that type of experience is valued within the academic environment. And of course, I mean, within these environments as well, some people stay on and become pure academics they see that track. The main thing is they have options, and they're looking at these things in advance. They're able to plan. And, um, I mean, some of the things that have happened in, in, in recent years, which are, which are highly valuable

for, for researchers, has been the increase in career development offices for researchers in universities.

[00:27:10] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** When I was finished my master's and I was thinking about a PhD, I went to the, the career guidance office, and they didn't know what I was talking about because they really just dealt with undergraduates looking for a job. But that has changed, and I think that's a really valuable resource that has been developed within universities. So they would be, three things I would say. The types of funding, how people are individually funded in general, the type of university and what it prioritises as an institution, and that final point I made there.

[00:27:40] **Bec Riley:** Thank you.

[00:27:42] **Bec Riley:** Where else could we look to in terms of good international lessons to learn from?

[00:27:46] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** I would take in terms of regions, the Italians are very effective And the Spanish indeed, are very effective at their, at their regional structures and how they fund regional. For example, the Italians would have regional PhD programs and there's a, a dual purpose in these, and these are usually funded by the region, not by the Italian central government.

[00:28:08] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** And the idea is that they link the PhDs with local organisations, whether they be companies or NGOs or whatever is prominent in that region of the country. But their focus very much is retention of talent. Because what they find, of course, especially what would be considered the more marginal regions of the country, that people graduate and then they head off somewhere else.

[00:28:28] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** They go to Rome, they go to Milan, they go to the more vibrant parts, let's say, of the country. But they have found that funding these localised type PhD programs have been very, very effective in terms of talent retention, which really is an important aspect. In Spain, I mentioned Ikerbasque, which is funding agency purely for the region.

[00:28:49] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** Also, the other region in Spain which is highly successful, probably the most successful region in the country, is that of Catalonia, and they have a very, very long tradition of these types of

interactions between the universities and the public and private sectors. In terms at national level, Poland has introduced a national doctoral scheme, an industrial doctoral scheme. Industry is meant in the broadest sense. It's not just for, manufacturing. It's actually meant to cover all types of non-academic organisations.

[00:29:20] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** So the Poles have done this with the purpose of changing how they direct their PhDs and their PhD programs. Estonia has done the same. Estonia is a very small country, but probably of the Baltic states, the most advanced, and very much into high tech companies in the areas of ICT and biotech.

[00:29:38] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** They've introduced the same kind of doctoral programs. But also too, and there, there will be plenty, there'll be lots of examples of this in the UK, and that is the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions, the European funded doctoral networks. They are highly sought after, and they are very well structured and funded because you have a partnership.

[00:29:56] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And this probably works very well in that you have a consortium of maybe five and 10 organisations, universities, non-academic organisations, companies, all working together, hosting maybe 10, 15 PhD students over three to four year periods. and they move. They move between the institutions, whether the universities and whether they are the, the non-academic organisations.

[00:30:20] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** So I think between all of them, there will be lots of practices which you could look at and say, "Yeah, these could be quite interesting from your point of view."

[00:30:30] **Bec Riley:** Following on from that, in terms of thinking about your wealth of work and the, and the recent research, what do you think are the next steps of research and investigation about how you create these more integrated processes between the academic, and, the real world, shall we say?

[00:30:48] **Bec Riley:** What, what do you think you'd like to work on next?

[00:30:51] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** what I would like to work on next would be changing how universities implement these type of policies of moving from

the traditional assessment process of their researchers, whether it be through recruitment or whether it be through career progression. Last year, I, I led a project, as you mentioned at the beginning, with 16 European countries involved, and it was how could they implement all these new recommendations.

[00:31:17] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** But this was very much at national level. And I think what would be really interesting is to go down one level further, because, as always with these things, the policy is great, but the devil is in the detail. Like, how do you make it actually happen? It's very easy if you want to assess somebody, say, somebody turns up and they've got X number of publications and Y numbers of journals of a high impact, et cetera, et cetera.

[00:31:40] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Grand. That's, that's dead easy to work with. But what happens if you've somebody coming in the door who has worked in three different organisations outside universities, who might have held patents or not? Or they may have worked in the public sector. How do you value that?

[00:31:55] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And then how do you compare your applicants who are coming in with these? And I think that's a really interesting challenge. You know, it, it, it really is the challenge because it all comes down to measurement. I mean, when you look at the current system, the current system developed because it was simple and effective.

[00:32:14] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** You could measure something. I would say now that has changed significantly with the amount of, let's say, dodgy journals of creative processing in terms of creative publication, et cetera, that really it, it has devalued much of that whole process of valuing just publications. But nonetheless, it persists as the unique method because it is easy and often because as well, because it is what governments will assess and measure. When they come in to assess the quality of the university and how it's progressed, they look at these things, despite the fact they keep telling you that you've got to focus on research impact on society and on the economy.

[00:32:54] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** So it's how to value that, it's how to assess that, I think will be a real challenge, and that's something I would like to be working on next.

[00:33:01] **Bec Riley:** I'm one of those people that came in with a weird and wonderful background that nobody could quite assess. It still continues to be, um, a bemusing process for somebody that's come from external organisations.

[00:33:21] **Bec Riley:** Finally, as we do with all the people that we invite on Placecast, we're gonna give you, the place-based innovation magic wand. Careful with it, it can grant a wish.

[00:33:31] **Bec Riley:** You have absolute power to do one of these things, but you must use your powers to make a tangible change to a specific place or function or activity. Your change should really be specific, measurable, actionable, recordable, and transferable, SMART, obviously. This SMART magic is hard to get hold of at the moment,

[00:33:51] **Bec Riley:** But it is also subject to 20% reduced fund multi-year budget settlement. So, you can have your choice of, a £10 million research project, to fund whatever you would like, half an hour, with a, a senior cabinet within a particular country with a slide deck, editorial control of the front page of a tabloid newspaper, a clause to insert in a bill, a simple message that went viral on TikTok or Instagram or your preferred content system, anyone that you could pick as an advocate for your work, and, something that, uh, will give you the answer to something that has bothered you forever.

[00:34:32] **Bec Riley:** So here's your magic wand.

[00:34:33] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** Well, before I pick up the wand, I'd have a look at these and think, "Well, you know, a 10 million project fund sounds great," but there are lots of project funds, so I'm not sure if that's what I would go for. A clause to insert into a bill? Yeah, that sounds good, but you insert a clause, and then you have to implement it, and who's gonna fund it?

[00:34:55] **Dr. Conor O'Caroll:** Who's gonna pay for it? Et cetera, et cetera. So no, I don't think I'd go for that. Half an hour with the cabinet and a slide

deck sounds very tempting, um, but I think they probably have forgotten who you were before you'd left the room because they would've moved on to the next far more important point on the agenda about the price of petrol, uh, et cetera.

[00:35:14] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** And, so looking at these different ways, I actually think that, editorial control of the front page of a tabloid would be a good one to have. Because it is there, you get out the, the short, sharp messages which can have a lot of impact, get people talking about it, which is what you want.

[00:35:34] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** You want people to talk about this, so you want people to be in that frame. yeah, I think that could be a good way. Y-you don't initially solve the problem. What you get is you, you make people aware of these things and get them thinking, because that is... Now, one can argue whether tabloids ever do anything like that, but nonetheless, it certainly is a good means of mass communication.

[00:35:56] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** TikTok would hit a very, narrow sector of the population in one sense. Of course, it would be valuable to communicate to much younger people, but in terms of having an impact at a more systemic level, I think, the tabloid would be good. Get universities in headlines, you know, "Universities are not just a waste of space," and, I think you could, you could do a good bit with that.

[00:36:20] **Bec Riley:** And probably, at the moment, a really good thing to do in terms of the lack of knowledge of the impact of universities and research to everyday lives, we probably concentrate too much on, promoting what we've done to each other and not enough to the wider public in those circumstances, 'cause things pass us by, that we didn't realise, uh, at all.

[00:36:41] **Bec Riley:** One of the things I learned recently was the microwave oven was invented at Birmingham University. Who knew? But it affects everybody's daily lives, doesn't it? Um- Yes ... and then we don't get enough of those everyday innovation stories out into the public. So I would probably agree with you on the, on the front page of the tabloid, as long as somebody else didn't fiddle with the headlines, that would be fine.

[00:37:05] **Bec Riley:** So, thank you so much for joining us today, Conor. It's been, it's been really interesting. A lot of what you have actually said is echoed in the LPIP program and the pilot areas that have been looking at developing their partnerships. And I think there's a lot of really good evidence and international examples that you provided that enables us to understand that actually, you know, these challenges are not just about a

[00:37:35] **Bec Riley:** university in an English city or town, actually the global challenges that, um, everybody's facing in terms of relevance and making a difference in the wider world. It's really good to hear, the recommendations that are coming out of Europe are the things that are also being embedded in UKRI through the strategy, and also universities are starting to adopt these practices and ways of working, which I've got great hopes for the future.

[00:38:05] **Bec Riley:** So thank you very much, and I hope, everybody has enjoyed that conversation, we'll follow further for future Placecast podcasts.

[00:38:15] **Dr. Conor O'Carroll:** Thank you very much, Bec. It's been a great pleasure to talk with you today.