

## Impact is for life, not just for REF with Kirsty High and Sean McCaul (recorded live at Impact Ignite 2025)

### (Research Adjacent Episode 84)

Kirsty and Sean are igniting research impact through relationships and resources

<https://researchadjacent.com/impact-ignite-episode-84/>



[00:00:00] **Sean McCaul:** The big issue can be when it comes to picking the best stories, people feel left out. And they feel left behind.

[00:00:08] **Kirsty High:** Projects are finishing with no money left over, and the first thing that gets cut is the impact bit, and I think it's because it's seen as the icing on the cake. But no one wants to eat cake without icing

[00:00:19] **Sean McCaul:** so these universities that bring in staff short term contracts, it might get them over the line and they might do OK in REF but it's not gonna help that impact environment, and it's not gonna help the next REF.

[00:00:35] **Kirsty High:** And they learnt from each other by reviewing each others as well. Okay. This is how the arts talk about impact. That's really interesting. I think science can learn a lot from that and vice versa.

[00:00:44] **Sarah McLusky:** Hello there. I'm Sarah McLusky and this is Research Adjacent.

[00:00:51] **Sarah McLusky:** Each episode I talk to amazing research adjacent professionals about what they do and why it makes a difference. Keep listening to find out why we think the research adjacent space is where the real magic happens.

[00:01:06] **Sarah McLusky:** Hello there, and if you're listening in real time, welcome to 2026. This month is also the birthday of the Research Adjacent podcast. We are turning three, as I put the first episode out in January, 2023, and I am genuinely amazed that what started is a 10 episode experiment is still going strong. And the reason it's still going is 'cause of people like you tuning in, putting the podcast together.

[00:01:30] **Sarah McLusky:** It takes a lot of work, but what makes all the difference is knowing that it is appreciated. So if you want to show your support for the podcast, there are a few easy things that you can do. Number one is to subscribe, follow, or rate in whatever platform you're using to listen to this. If you would like to send a comment or review, you can email, send a voice note or leave a review on Podchaser, and you'll find links to all those things in the show notes.

[00:01:55] **Sarah McLusky:** And finally, please do share posts on social media, screenshots of the episode you're listening to, anything like that. Send your favorite episode to somebody that you think would enjoy it. As they say, every little helps.

[00:02:08] **Sarah McLusky:** So on with today's episode, we are kick-starting the new year with a special extended episode, which was recorded in front of a live audience at the Impact Ignite Conference.

[00:02:19] **Sarah McLusky:** Impact Ignite was held in Southampton in November 2025, and was organised by the Research Impact Academy. To find out more about Research Impact Academy do listen back to episode 75 with founder Tamika Heiden.

[00:02:34] **Sarah McLusky:** My guests are Kirsty High and Sean McCaul. They are both research impact leads, but for slightly different kinds of organizations with different priorities and pressures.

[00:02:44] **Sarah McLusky:** Kirsty is Research Impact Manager at the independent research institution, the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. While Sean is a faculty impact officer at Ulster University in Northern Ireland. The big difference is that Sean has to submit to REF, which is the UK research evaluation framework exercise while Kirsty doesn't.

[00:03:05] **Sarah McLusky:** Now, if you want a bit of a refresher on REF and why it drives the UK impact agenda, do go back and listen to episode 80 from the Hidden REF Festival where I give a bit more background on it there. So despite having different drivers for impact, both Sean and Kirsty do work for organisations where supporting impactful research is considered a priority.

[00:03:26] **Sarah McLusky:** In our conversation, we talk about the importance of building relationships, the challenges of stretching time and resources to support as many researchers as possible, and why tracking and evaluating impact is often the biggest challenge. You'll also hear audience questions from Ged Hall at the University of Leeds, Saskia Gent from Insights for Impact, Jenny Lockett of Plymouth Marine Lab and Adam Lockwood from NIHR. Thanks also to Tamika Heiden for inviting me to come and record at the event, and a huge shout out to the tech guys from All Parties and Events who did the mics and the actual recording. So without further ado, let's listen on to hear Kirsty and Sean's story.

[00:04:07] **Sarah McLusky:** So welcome to my guests also, welcome to you, to the audience, to the Research Adjacent podcast. I am joined today by Kirsty High, I'm gonna get them to introduce themselves in just a minute, Kirsty High and Sean McCaul, who are gonna tell us a bit about what they do and, their career journey to get there.

[00:04:27] **Sarah McLusky:** Kirsty, first of all, could you tell us a bit about who you are and what you do?

[00:04:30] **Kirsty High:** So I am Kirsty High and I'm the Research Impact Manager for the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, which is an independent research institute.

[00:04:38] **Sarah McLusky:** Fantastic.

[00:04:39] **Sarah McLusky:** Thanks very much Kirsty and Sean?

[00:04:41] **Sean McCaul:** I'm Sean McCaul. I'm Faculty Impact Officer at Ulster University in Northern Ireland.

[00:04:46] **Sarah McLusky:** Brilliant. So we've got a really nice contrast here, both people doing impact jobs, but for different kinds of organisations, and that's one of the things we're gonna dig into a little bit today.

[00:04:56] **Sarah McLusky:** So I wonder if you could tell us, Kirsty, let's start with you. Tell us a bit about what does your job entail on a day-to-day basis?

[00:05:03] **Kirsty High:** It's very good question. So the aim of my job is really to help our organisation and our scientists tell people how their research is important to society and the environment, and in our case as well. On a day-to-day basis, I guess that involves identifying examples of impact and helping people write those up into narrative stories that can be used for our comms team or for telling our funders about.

[00:05:32] **Kirsty High:** And then I also try and support impact happening earlier on. People writing impact writing research proposals, I'll try and get involved in those and help them embed plans for delivering impact in them and to do training and also do things like look at our policy impact as a organisation as well. Lots of different things.

[00:05:57] **Sarah McLusky:** It does sound like lots of different things. So do you work right across the whole organisation?

[00:06:01] **Kirsty High:** I do, yeah.

[00:06:02] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. So very much specialising. There's a clue in the name, but ecology and hydrology. Yeah. Environmental science, isn't it?

[00:06:08] **Kirsty High:** We do the air as well, which isn't in our name, which upsets some people. Yeah, so all sorts of things. Biodiversity loss, climate change, mitigation, lots and lots of things. And so I've been in post for about a year and really a huge amount of that time has also been just trying to get to know what our researchers do and getting to know them as well because this job is all about relationships with researchers as well. It's really important.

[00:06:31] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, I think we'll come to that in a little moment. But maybe, Sean, could you tell us a bit about what you do on a day-to-day basis?

[00:06:36] **Sean McCaul:** Okay. I'm part of a four person impact team. So we have three faculty impact officers and one impact manager.

[00:06:44] **Sean McCaul:** We were formed back in 2018, just right in before the last REF. I suppose our remit is to create and cultivate an environment where impact can thrive. So we work across with 17 units of assessment. I look after computing, engineering and the built environment, bits of health sciences and bits of biomedical.

[00:07:04] **Sean McCaul:** But the four of us work together in delivering support on an ongoing basis. One thing we did do at the very start, we went and had a look at what the best university's done in the UK and in Europe.

[00:07:16] **Sean McCaul:** And what sort of impact activities they provided. So we designed our own we copied it and pasted from other people as such, but our impact development series. So we run that from the 1st of August to the 31st of July each year. And it entails seven main objectives. The first one is impact funding. So I manage the research impact fund. So we invite academics to apply for pots of funding. About 4,000 pound each time. Now the funding must be used to advance impact from existing research. It's not for new research activities.

[00:07:53] **Sean McCaul:** We also run activity we called Impact 30. So every two months we bring in a guest speaker from the university who's an impact champion, who's done well on REF, or people know.

[00:08:03] **Sean McCaul:** Impact 30 is called, they talk for 30 minutes in a lunchtime seminar. And then there's 30 minutes Q and A that goes down really well because people can hear best practice from their colleagues. We just say six, six times a year, but we then bring in three or four external experts like Saskia Wallcott. Sometimes people are tired hearing the same voice, and bringing someone with a better track record, can help just enforce our message as well.

[00:08:29] **Sean McCaul:** We're a bit unusual in Northern Ireland and there's two universities in Northern Ireland, us and Queens Queens are Belfast based, but Ulster University's spread across three different campuses. So the impact team spread across those locations. So as part of our impact development series, we also run drop in clinics where we just send all staff emails out saying, look, the impact team's gonna be on this campus, on this day. They're tea and coffee. Come along for a chat. Just get to know people or it's not about REF or about case studies, just any questions.

[00:08:57] **Sean McCaul:** It's about any impact. Come and chat there. So that, that works quite well. So say the funding the external people come in to help is definitely a big thing for us. And then we also have an internal website where we provide online training materials. There's impact planners in there, there's engagement planners.

[00:09:15] **Sean McCaul:** There's copies of presentations from previous impact authorities. We do record some of our sessions too, where people can't make it. Their external sessions, with permission of providers, we'll put that recording up. So that's our core activity. Yeah. But every day we're, we be approached with different problems, different queries, so it's wide and varied.

[00:09:34] **Sean McCaul:** And because we're multi-campus and multi UOA. You have no idea what you're gonna be asked from on the evidence.

[00:09:40] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, that certainly seems the case. It's almost like impact people have to be little bit experts in lots and lots of different things, or at least know enough to be dangerous, I think, as they say.

[00:09:50] **Sarah McLusky:** It sounds like a lot of the work that you do, Sean, is around this kind of upskilling and professional development side of things, whereas it sounds like the work you do is more that oversight and connection. Would that be fair or?

[00:10:03] **Kirsty High:** I do some of that as well. But yeah it is actually a lot of what I do is also about connecting professional services teams. Which I think was slightly different to when I worked in a university just before this, and I think that's slightly different. We have a lot of project management staff, for example and people who look after our data, our data sets. Yeah. And coordinating and talking to those as well as the scientists.

[00:10:26] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. And what sorts of support are you finding that the professional services teams need?

[00:10:32] **Kirsty High:** Mainly how to track our impact as well. So there are lots of people trying to understand how what they do is relevant to the wider society, which is what impact's all about. And often people just need to help with that or just to talk it through with someone and just, have a chat about are we doing the right thing? What do you think? And just have a bit of a brainstorming session about what we should be doing.

[00:10:55] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Both of you have mentioned that you've said there about relationships and the importance of just being available and being, a sort of helpful voice. Is that relationship networking part of thing a big part of your role?

[00:11:09] **Kirsty High:** I think often when we are in research impact you're asking people to do something extra to what their core, a lot of people are there to do research or to teach in university, and we're often asking them to just do something a little bit more. So the more we can help them with that instead of just going and saying, can you do this for me?

[00:11:30] **Kirsty High:** It the more we can say, can I work with you to do this and be approachable and supportive, the easier it is for us and them. Yeah. So it's really important to build those relationships.

[00:11:40] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Making it feel like more of a collaboration. Yeah. And with a shared goal rather than just, I need you to do this thing. Yeah. So relationship building sounds like an important part of your work as well, Sean?

[00:11:52] **Sean McCaul:** Yeah, a hundred percent. We're always telling our staff, our researchers and academics when they are going out to outside world building relationships is huge. But it's the same internal as well, so one of the challenges we had a couple years ago when the team was formed was people knew who we were in different roles, but all of a sudden we were coming along to say, we're now impact people.

[00:12:13] **Sean McCaul:** And just getting the trust and that took time. It took year or two something, three years. Because we were quite new the role. So thankfully now I think we're seven, eight years into the role. Our relationships are very good across the board. People now trust us. They probably like me more because I have money.

[00:12:32] **Sean McCaul:** When I go looking for something off them, they say well, it's a two way street. Yeah. that kinda way but no, without good relationships, we would definitely struggle to do our job now.

[00:12:41] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. And I think that relationships are so important, but they're also, as you say, they really take time to develop. Yeah. It's often very time consuming and slow work and work that isn't always very visible and we talk about impact in terms of, things that you can evidence and that sort of stuff can be the hardest thing to evidence, can't it? Have you found that connective work is appreciated in your organisation?

[00:13:09] **Kirsty High:** By some people. Yeah, I think I, I hope so. It's a really difficult thing to answer, isn't it? I think yeah. Lots of people understand that it's important and recognise it, but yeah, it isn't always visible. That's right. Yeah. Sometimes you'll end up with a finished case study, but it's not always obvious how long it's taken to get to that because it does take a long time and, yeah, it's finding those things to say, I've done this as well. Yeah. As you go along the way is difficult but important to do.

[00:13:38] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. One of the biggest challenges we've got at the moment isn't it is identifying somebody who was talking about it yesterday, excellence in the process, not just excellence in the outputs as well.

[00:13:47] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. So you both work, as you mentioned, in different kinds of organisations. So organisations doing research. I think a huge number of people just think research is something that happens in universities, but there are these independent, essentially research organisations, places like the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology.

[00:14:05] **Sarah McLusky:** Obviously in universities, REF is a big driver of things. How is that different where you work Kirsty?

[00:14:16] **Kirsty High:** So we, we don't submit to REF, but we, at CEH where we get a lot of funding from the Natural Environment Research Council. So they impose a mini REF on us. So we, we are just assessed against five other research centres and so we do have it and we have reason to develop case studies, but I don't think the, that evaluation is anywhere near as visible to our scientists as REF is. I think within a university, every academic knows what REF is and knows it's important and totally understands why they should engage. Hopefully they should do that anyway. But it is different I think. Yeah. And our scientists and I think a lot of the research institutes, they do deliver impact.

[00:14:57] **Kirsty High:** They're absolutely delivering impact, but when we try to say. Can you evidence that? And could you tell us about the process and can you write it up and communicate it? There is a little bit more. Why should we do that? Why do we need to? You know we're doing it. So why do we need this process?

[00:15:13] **Kirsty High:** And I think without REF telling us to have a process, it can be a little bit difficult. Although there are obviously people who really want to do it. There are scientists who really want to help with that. As well.

[00:15:24] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, I think I mentioned to you before we started recording is that I noticed on the website that your organisation's tagline is Excellent Environmental Science with Impact.

[00:15:35] **Sarah McLusky:** So I thought it was really interesting that impact is right up there in the mission of the organisation. Even if you say, as you say, some people are still not necessarily sold on the idea

[00:15:46] **Kirsty High:** it's the nature of the research we do. I guess it's I say we do it as if I do it, but

[00:15:52] **Sarah McLusky:** You're part of the team

[00:15:53] **Kirsty High:** The nature of the research is to find solutions to these, the big environmental crises that are happening.

[00:15:58] **Kirsty High:** So it has impact, but often research with a potential impact is interpreted as research with impact. And not always taking it to the next step. And looking at how that's gone to the next step is not always done.

[00:16:11] **Sarah McLusky:** Ah, interesting. So Sean, you've said that your team, even when it was formed, it was formed for the purposes of REF. How does REF inform the work that you do?

[00:16:23] **Sean McCaul:** So the university would argue that it wasn't formed for REF, it just

[00:16:27] **Sarah McLusky:** happened to yeah.

[00:16:29] **Sean McCaul:** And it's funny because we've been through a restructuring around 2017. And they decided to create new posts and new roles. So the impact team was formed in January, 2018.

[00:16:39] **Sean McCaul:** But the message we were getting from the start, from the hierarchy at the university was, REF just something we have to do every seven, eight years as a league table. We need to do it and do it well to make sure we get the certain amount of funding from the UK government, whatnot. But the argument was also was even if there was no REF. We still must do impact. There's no point in doing research for the sake of doing research. There must be an end goal. And Kirsty was saying there sometimes her guys might not take it to the very last stage. Our guys have to. Yeah. And that's where we come along, they do the great research they do a bit of impact, wee bit of engagement. But they aren't sure how to engage, who to engage with, stakeholder engagement, who do you speak to? How do they speak to them? They aren't very good at tracking what they've done evidencing what they've done. So we come in and do that then. So I would like to think that if REF was to go away, the impact team will still have a role.

[00:17:34] **Sean McCaul:** We're not the hierarchy, but say, I'm not too sure. We will say we're here not just REF. I mean people used to approach me for funding too. Say, look, you know what I understand you are all for REF. I say, no we will fund any activities that promote impact. So even if you aren't going forward as a case study, we'll still talk to you and everything else.

[00:17:54] **Sean McCaul:** Obviously I'd say from next year onwards, whenever we start getting close to REF, our focus will be on those. Developing those case studies. But for now, we're here to help everyone across every UOA. Whether or not they're an ECR, mid career or later stage.

[00:18:07] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Yeah. I, it is that sense of, I, I love what you said there about we're here even if it wasn't for REF, and as you say, I would hope that senior people in universities would see that. But I think there have always been researchers, haven't they? Yeah. Impact and REF has only become a big thing in the last 15 years really? And there's always been people wanting to get their research to the people who can benefit from it. It's just sometimes

been formulated in different ways, and I think that possibly then speaks Sean to, to your career journey and how you've ended up, because you used to do another job, which was the predecessor of impact, wasn't it? Tell us a bit about your journey into this kind of work.

[00:18:50] **Sean McCaul:** Okay. I've been employed at Ulster since 1999. Which is last century makes it seem really old. God really old for this, but so for the first 10 years I was more involved in incubator and business park development. So we had incubators and science parks in the three main campuses. So my job would've been to help startup companies get a foot in facilities. We also encourage spin in companies that come in to university. And I say my job is to make sure operational wise, premises wise, everything else. And then whenever these guys needed help, I would reach out to the business school or whoever, that, that was my core remit.

[00:19:28] **Sean McCaul:** Things changed. 2009, 2010. There was more demand in our space for research purposes. The vice chancellor might have changed, and we said, look, we shouldn't be doing this anymore because that's not our core remit. So we moved the companies out of our three parks and the premises then became our research facilities because we were in bad need of them. I moved into what was called the Office of Innovation then. They asked me to manage a three year EU funded programme. It was called ICE Innovation for Competitive Enterprises. So we worked with tri- regional, the six border countries. In Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the west coast of Scotland.

[00:20:05] **Sean McCaul:** And our job was to go out. My job was to go out to find out where the weak points were in companies. Bring the problem back in the university and try and find out who in the university could go out and help them. So that was quite good. Quite challenging and rewarding. Yeah. That was a three year programme and then most people are probably familiar with the KTP scheme in the UK. So in Ireland there's a similar programme called Fusion. They're called Innovation Boost, but it's the North South equivalent of KTP. It's to encourage on all Ireland ecosystem of business support and academic support.

[00:20:36] **Sean McCaul:** So it's for, North universities work with South companies and were South companies work with North universities.

[00:20:42] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, interesting.

[00:20:42] **Sean McCaul:** So I managed that for five years and again, I'd have to reach out to companies in the Republic of Ireland. Then find out what their issues were. What their problems were. And if you wanna come along with Ulster University, there's a very good funding programme to do that.

[00:20:55] **Sean McCaul:** So up until 2018 I was always working with external companies. Yeah. External providers. And I was only, when I started the Impact role, I started looking really more closely at our research, so that was is challenging.

[00:21:09] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, but it's still that role of finding, it's like joining the dots, isn't it? Yeah. Between, like you say, businesses, whether it's between businesses and research or businesses and support needs, or now the researchers that you work with and what are their support needs around impact. Yeah. It's still that kind of connective role, isn't it? Joining everything up. It makes sense why it's the same skills and I've, I find, yeah, I think as you said KTPs for anybody maybe listening or here who doesn't know. Knowledge transfer partnerships is the all, so some of these things like public engagement and knowledge transfer partnerships and business innovation and spin in, never heard spin in companies before.



[00:21:51] **Sarah McLusky:** That's a new term. I've heard of spin out companies and all this stuff that was going on, and it's almost just all been sucked together, into impact and and that kind of blanket term of how research connects with the wider world. So I think it, it makes sense to me at least Okay. Why those things came together.

[00:22:12] **Sarah McLusky:** Kirsty, tell us about your journey into your job.

[00:22:15] **Kirsty High:** Yeah, it's similar. Actually, I started in knowledge exchange as well. Out of my PhD, which is in analytical chemistry, I did a NERC funded knowledge exchange fellowship, which they don't, I don't think they exist anymore. A really amazing scheme. Where you basically just worked with, you did knowledge exchange to translate research into usable practice.

[00:22:37] **Kirsty High:** So I worked with a Historic England my background was in the deterioration of archeology in wetlands. And how they're protected in archeological excavations. And I just really loved that experience. I did it for five years. Because I managed to squeeze in two maternities during that. And when I tried to go back to academia, I didn't really see a path that I wanted to do. I liked knowledge exchange so much. I liked that idea of getting the research out there that I don't think there is a space, I still don't think there's a space for that within academia to be a researcher and still do that.

[00:23:14] **Kirsty High:** There's no, you can do a fellowship, you can do a postdoc, but a permanent position just isn't there. And I think it is actually something that would. Be really good in organisation, in universities in particular to have embedded knowledge exchange positions within departments. So I was faced with a decision whether to go back to being a researcher or find something else and I just didn't want to spend my life publishing papers and doing nothing else.

[00:23:39] **Kirsty High:** So, I just happened to be living in North Wales. Loved living in North Wales and didn't really want to move, which is probably a familiar story to a lot of people. Yeah. You just think, okay, what can I do that fits my skillset? And I applied for a job, as an Impact Officer at Bangor University and I just absolutely loved it.

[00:23:57] **Kirsty High:** I just I had an amazing team at Bangor University. I just walked into just this extremely warm, lovely team. And I still think research professionals are the nicest people. And yes, there's something about the skills that we all have, I think that just make us nice people to work with. And I did that for three years and just thought I found what I like doing is talking about research all day, telling people how great research is. And helping people get the best out there, what they do is just really fun.

[00:24:32] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. It's amazing that you've found your place, but your story is so common with people that I've interviewed in the podcast, just people that I know personally as well of coming to a point, maybe after having children or that sort of thing, and either being this is where I live now and I don't want to move, so I need to find a job in the local community. And often there's that expectation with research jobs isn't there that you go where the research is and that an expectation of moving around.

[00:25:00] **Sarah McLusky:** So sometimes it's that, and sometimes it's also I've got this other stuff in my life. I don't want that pressure or that, that publish or perish,

[00:25:08] **Kirsty High:** It always felt like a bit of a fight to go back to academia. And I wasn't ready for it then. Yeah. And yeah, I found what I liked doing instead.

[00:25:17] **Sarah McLusky:** Oh, perfect. I think on that positive note, perhaps leads nicely into if you could tell us maybe a one or two things you've worked on that you're really proud of.

[00:25:25] **Kirsty High:** So I think the biggest thing that at Bangor University, I, I oversaw implementing a a fund just like Sean's described, actually.

[00:25:32] **Kirsty High:** They'd never really had anything like that before. So I ran that for three, three rounds of funding where we gave some internal funding from the HEFCW. It was in Wales.

[00:25:42] **Sarah McLusky:** Okay.

[00:25:43] **Kirsty High:** Yeah. I can't remember what

[00:25:44] **Sarah McLusky:** I trust your pronunciation more than mine

[00:25:46] **Kirsty High:** To impact generating projects. And I think we gave a lot of opportunities to early career researchers in particular through that it was their first go at applying for funding and then we know that a lot of them went on to do other bigger projects.

[00:26:02] **Kirsty High:** A lot of that funding led to a lot of our, the Bangor University's impact case studies that'll be submitted next time. And the other thing we saw in that process is that people getting involved in the reviewing of the applications and writing them and assessing them, actually raised the impact literacy a little bit.

[00:26:21] **Kirsty High:** Certain departments in particular, just and also learning from other departments. So I worked across the university there as well as science, healthcare and arts and humanities. And they learnt from each other by reviewing each others as well. Okay. This is how the arts talk about impact. That's really interesting. I think science can learn a lot from that and vice versa. So yeah, I was really proud of that initiative. Yeah.

[00:26:43] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. I think it is incredible. I learned more about doing funding applications from, I was, for a while I was on a panel, giving, it was grants for public engagement projects but just that process of reviewing, you learn so much from it, don't you?

[00:26:57] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Sean, tell us about some things you're proud of.

[00:27:00] **Sean McCaul:** Yeah, again, probably a huge example of the impact funding there, you see where we identified through projects and seeing those projects turning these small ideas with little impact growing into more funding, developing impact case studies from those small acorns.

[00:27:16] **Sean McCaul:** So they see some people come along not knowing about impact much and between getting funding from us and getting support from us and then over time developing a top story for REF was key. In terms of proud probably our REF results has been the biggest achievement, to come in on the back of not a great 2014 for the university in general. So we had, we submitted, I think it was 65 impact case studies,

[00:27:42] **Sarah McLusky:** right? Yeah.

[00:27:42] **Sean McCaul:** We had 97% were three and four star. I had a hundred percent between my units. Wow. Which was a big, maybe a while. Now the problem is how would I be that next time around? That's,

[00:27:52] **Sarah McLusky:** you've set the bar very high there.

[00:27:54] **Sean McCaul:** But even to see how far the impact team has come along. As a group, as a collective. A colleague of mine, Karen, probably around here somewhere today, but we started at the same time and we were asked to go out and speak to people within the first three or four months about REF. I had no idea REF was, and I had a winged for a long time.

[00:28:14] **Sean McCaul:** Basically could like, so took us a year or so even they could up to speed with what everything was all about. Yeah. We were coming to events like this, going to REF conferences, speaking to academics in other universities who'd impact teams as well. They learned from them.

[00:28:27] **Sean McCaul:** I thought we, we hit the ground running once we got the basic understanding of what it was all about. But I would say so far it's definitely been the REF performance has been our, our shining moment.

[00:28:37] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. That is fantastic. You've said there though, one of the challenges was just understanding this new world.

[00:28:43] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. The REF and all the acronyms and exactly what it meant. And obviously you've found your way through that. Are there any other particular challenges that you've faced along this career journey?

[00:28:54] **Sean McCaul:** Yeah. I would say the biggest issue I had to start was people knew who I was in a tech transfer, knowledge exchange. And who am I to come along and tell them what impact was. So it goes back to that relationship building again. And even for, because we come in two and a half or three years before REF, we were giving people advice on how to prepare for REF and based on us reading the guidance, which was not always holding clear what it meant as well. So people in the main took our advice on board. Some maybe didn't because they didn't think we were right and we never done a REF before.

[00:29:30] **Sean McCaul:** But thankfully the ones who took it on board done very well. But the challenge was building that relationship and building that trust and trying to show we were a source of expertise and knowledge and what we were saying was true.

[00:29:41] **Sean McCaul:** Now, whenever the re results come out, we were really nervous because we thought if we've told these guys the wrong information, we're in trouble.

[00:29:50] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah.

[00:29:51] **Sean McCaul:** But no, thankfully it came good. But that was a big a challenge.

[00:29:54] **Sarah McLusky:** Oh fantastic. As you say that you've overcome it, and I think a lot of people relate to that sense of being accepted as an expert in the thing that you are genuinely an expert in, up against people who see themselves as experts. And sometimes there is that pushback, isn't there? Yeah. Who are you to tell me what to do? Exactly. But yeah, well done. Kirsty tell us about challenges that you've faced on your journey.

[00:30:20] **Kirsty High:** I guess this is a, a first world problem to have, but at CEH I think there's so much impact happening that sometimes I struggle to decide who to support and that you have to decide sometimes I've gotta support the strongest impact case study here and maybe feel like you are letting down someone who's just starting on an impact journey, and that's a real shame. So yeah, it's a nice problem to have but I wish there were more of me to give more support sometimes.

[00:30:47] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Maybe we can solve that with the infamous Research Adjacent magic wands. They have been primed, and anybody who doesn't know this from the podcast, I always ask my guests what would they do if they had a magic wand and if money and time were no object.

[00:31:01] **Sarah McLusky:** Kirsty, what would you do with your magic wand?

[00:31:05] **Kirsty High:** So I want more money and time.

[00:31:06] **Sarah McLusky:** You get that. What you gonna do with it?

[00:31:08] **Kirsty High:** So I, so ultimately I would like suddenly people to appreciate the impact is a fundamental part of the research process and it can't be separated.

[00:31:17] **Kirsty High:** And the reason I say that is that what I'm seeing a lot lately is funding's getting cut. Projects are finishing with no money left over, and the first thing that gets cut is the impact bit, it's the impact delivery or the impact pathways. And I think it's because it's seen as the icing on the cake. But no one wants to eat cake without icing, so it needs to have icing on it. So I wish people would see that it's really important and you can't just cut that. Yeah.

[00:31:44] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. I love that analogy. Who wants cake without icing? Yeah. Thanks Kirsty. Sean, what would you like to do with your magic wand?

[00:31:51] **Sean McCaul:** Okay, probably controversial, right? But

[00:31:53] **Sarah McLusky:** go for it.

[00:31:54] **Sean McCaul:** If I had a wand, I would convert half us all into men. The joke was there.

[00:31:59] **Sarah McLusky:** No, but it's, you. It's a good, it's a good point.

[00:32:02] **Sean McCaul:** I've only realized from coming here last year to the Research Academy with a cohort, we're 25 in the team. And there's only five men. I just realized, I'm part of, I, I'm one of four, there was three women are Queens colleagues almost.

[00:32:14] **Sean McCaul:** So I just find it a very female orientated, that's not a bad thing. Just an observations. So I take that back and we change these all day.

[00:32:22] **Sarah McLusky:** No, but do you know, I think it's a really valid point. And the fact that you've said your team is 25% men is actually quite good. I think by some standards. I think some research that's been done, has said that this research adjacent world can be up to 90% female. Yeah. Yeah. And and if we take that idea of equality and diversity, seriously. And if we're saying that everybody's perspectives are important and that's why it's important to have a range then yeah, we need more male voices in the room. So I think you are allowed to say that. I don't think it's as controversial as you might. I don't think it's as controversial as you might think.

[00:32:57] **Sean McCaul:** And again, I'm wishlist, I mean we're, we are quite streamlined at the university, we are quite lean on what we do. But as part of our role, there comes an awful lot of admin work.

[00:33:08] **Sean McCaul:** So when I give out an impact fund setting up cost centre codes, it's nominal codes, it's tracking the money, it's getting reports. We do an awful lot of chasing paperwork and red tape and we had asked in the past at last restructuring for an admin person

that would help do that set up. Now we never got it. So magic wand, I would create a new person to be that person that can do all that stuff. They allow the impact team to go out and spend more time doing what we're good at.

[00:33:37] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Oh, that's definitely I do remember the pain of some of that. Yeah. Cost Centres and budget codes and forms and Yes. HR and all that kind of stuff. Yes. Excellent use of the magic wand there.

[00:33:49] **Sarah McLusky:** I think now we will turn it over to the audience. If you have got any questions that you would like to ask to our team as we said at the beginning, if you have got a question you'd like to ask, please put up your hand and somebody will bring a microphone to you.

[00:34:03] **Ged Hall:** So Sean this is to you and I'm just really interested. I think it comes from having Irish ancestry but I'm interested in terms of the different influences. So when you are working with colleagues in similar roles at southern universities without the REF and the REF plays a big influence in your working life, what do you notice that you can learn from them without that influence that you've brought into your practice?

[00:34:32] **Sean McCaul:** Yeah, great question. So about two years ago, they created an all Ireland impact forum for people who are involved across Ulster, Queens and their six or seven universities and in the south as well. What I've learned from those guys is first of all, they don't have the pressures of REF, but they use the REF guidance to drive their own systems internally. They get a lot more money than we do. That's a, the Irish government throw money. Sometimes tens of millions compared to us how they tap into a small pot of money. So I haven't learned too much from them, apart from, that I'm jealous that they don't have the pressures of the REF and they more money.

[00:35:12] **Sean McCaul:** It's all women, again, just an observation. All women's happen to, but I think they learn more from us. Because most of the impact roles at southern universities are relatively new. We're seen as now almost veterans, even though we've only been here since 2018. They tap into our networks and our expertise and we invite them along to Ulster as well to participate in our in- person only workshops and they pick up quite a bit from that. And what's quite rewarding is I'll see like University of Galway recently have launched their own impact seminar series. And they've tailored along our lines, which is great to see. So I think it's sharing best practice.

[00:35:48] **Giovanna Lima:** I'm Giovanna Lima. I'm a confessed impact nerd, so I'll go back to Kirsty's point on choosing only the best teams or best stories because as impact nerds in the room, I feel sometimes we have a duty of care towards the whole community. And we worked really hard with the Erasmus University when we're doing an impact report to showcase the different maturity levels of impact, let's say.

[00:36:14] **Giovanna Lima:** So it could we hear a little bit more perhaps of what we could do as a community to recognise the complexities of impact beyond the success stories, let's say. It's just to go deeper a little bit in that point because if we don't do it, I don't know who will. So that's a little bit of the complexity of impact, how can we deal with that and recognise maturity levels, timeframes, all of the things we know about impact things.

[00:36:42] **Kirsty High:** I think it's a really important point and, I think it's one of the worst things about REF is that it makes us focus on the best examples and sometimes for early career researchers, they see us celebrating these people who've been doing it for 30, 40 years.

[00:36:56] **Kirsty High:** Of course they've got more impact because they've been doing it longer, but it's not something that's unachievable. And if we don't also support them, then there's no one for that gap in future as well. So I think the best thing I did in to support it was this internal funding pot and making sure that a certain amount of that went to early career researchers to really help them.

[00:37:17] **Kirsty High:** To help them kickstart, exploring their own ideas and building their own networks, that's really important as well. And making sure that there's space for them to do that is yeah, what I would say is critical.

[00:37:30] **Sean McCaul:** Yeah. And again, likewise when it came to our funding pot we do split the fund pot, 50% ECRs and 50% non ECRs to make sure those early careers get, get a better chance.

[00:37:42] **Sean McCaul:** The big issue can be when it comes to picking the best stories, people feel left out. And they feel left behind. And I might need, for example, for UoA11 computing, I need five case studies this time round, but I have nine potential case studies and they're all almost fighting each other to find out who's gonna, who's gonna make the cut.

[00:38:03] **Sean McCaul:** So where there is an opportunity for people to merge, especially bring on the ECRs on board, who may be weak on their own they create a stronger case study. But I think what's gonna help, we're still waiting on the REF guidance to come out, as but what should help this time is the whole environment and engagement narrative section.

[00:38:19] **Sean McCaul:** We're still encouraging people. Keep working on your stories, keep working on your impact. If it's gonna be a good enough impact case study, it's gonna happen naturally with a bit of effort and that'll help. But even if your case study and your story is not selected as going forward for REF, we can still use that engagement, that, that impact in our narrative statement. So that appears to keep people on board as long as they, if it as if we're left out and ignored here. We keep telling people we don't give anyone guarantees about who's gonna make the cut? It will not be made near the time.

[00:38:51] **Sean McCaul:** But for those who don't make it, we can still use their impactful work

[00:38:54] **Sarah McLusky:** and so important to keep, to nurture those because they might not make the cut this time. Yeah. But they might be the ones that, that are the stand out for next time. Yeah. It's gotta start somewhere, hasn't it? Yeah. So

[00:39:06] **Kirsty High:** I think it's also that a case study isn't the only way, isn't the only way. And I've talked in both of my institutions about how we reward and recognise in a formal way people who do impact. And often it comes back to, we'll promote people who, if they submit a case study, but. What about the people who don't but still do impact. Yeah it's really, it's, I think it's a very complicated issue.

[00:39:31] **Saskia Gent:** Hi. It's Saskia from Insights for Impact. A question for both of you, but it was actually prompted by Sean's observations about how long he's been in the business and in particular the stability of the team because we know that short term contracts is a perennial problem in sort of impact sector. So I'd be interested in hearing from you both what you think the

value is of having that sort of stable long-term team, long-term connection and what you think the challenges are about some of the sort of shorter term contracts that we're seeing increasingly in the run up to the REF.

[00:40:01] **Sean McCaul:** Yeah I'll go first Saskia. Thank you. Thankfully when the, when our impact team at Ulster was formed, we were all given permanent contracts. We weren't given two, three we weren't employed for REF. That gives us as individuals much more stability that we're gonna be around for a while.

[00:40:18] **Sean McCaul:** Saying that, shortly after the REF results come out, there was a senior conversation about do we keep the impact team together or do we split them up and bring them back together again around now? So we had that conversation saying, look, you need to keep us together as a team. That if you're saying that impact is not just for REF, it should happen all the time.

[00:40:38] **Sean McCaul:** If we're going to create that environment where Impact thrives, we need that sort of stability. And if we were chopping and changing, if I was to leave tomorrow and a new Impact officer come in, they would have to start building up all those relationships, which I've built up over the last seven or eight years.

[00:40:55] **Sean McCaul:** People like seeing familiar faces and people like seeing you have a track record now. And there was, I think it was girl called Louise Rutt, who wrote an article last week. It was in Times Higher and she was saying about, about, writing four star case studies, no academics starts out at the start of a seven year cycle saying, I want to write a case study and make the four star.

[00:41:15] **Sean McCaul:** What they do is they go out and they engage, they do authentic, two way impactful research that there's great impact and the story would come itself. And she compared that with these universities. Now, over the last couple days, I've seen numerous emails come in for impact roles, for REF.

[00:41:34] **Sean McCaul:** So these universities that, that, that bring in staff short term contracts, it might get them over the line and they might do OK in REF but it's not gonna help that impact environment, and it's not gonna help the next REF. So we just find having that stability, having long term contracts and people internally knowing we're here for long term. I think it just helps the overall life cycle.

[00:41:59] **Kirsty High:** Yeah. I just totally agree that it's, we, as we said right at the beginning, it's all about relationships. So every time you move or someone else comes in, it's all just gotta start again. Yeah. And it's really hard to help support a case study if you don't actually know the research behind it that well.

[00:42:16] **Kirsty High:** So it takes so much time to get up to speed with that. And particularly if you're working across the whole organisation, you've got multiple people to support. It's just hard work. And I actually left Bangor University, not it was, it became quite clear that one of us was gonna have to leave at some point.

[00:42:33] **Kirsty High:** We were in a fairly big team and, noises were being made. I never wanted to be in a position where I was up against a colleague that I really liked. So I took the opportunity to leave when I could. And starting again is hard work for us. It is hard work and it is hard to leave people that you've built relationships with as well when you're in the middle of something and yeah, it's, it's bad for the sector, but it's also bad for us as individuals, I think.

[00:42:59] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, and I think in these roles that are so much about relationship building, connections, we talk a lot about institutional knowledge, but often that institutional knowledge is actually in a person.

[00:43:10] **Sarah McLusky:** It's not about the organisation, it's about that person and what's lost if they go. Yeah, so I'm sure a lot of people wish that, that their organisations were as committed to impact, perhaps as the ones that, that you're in at the moment.

[00:43:25] **Jenny Lockett:** Hi, I'm Jenny Lockett. I'm Head of Impact at Plymouth Marine Laboratory. So similar organisation to Kirsty's, the way we're set up. And you both mentioned training, which we deliver as well. What do you focus on? What's the key skills you wanna train your researchers in to make them engage in impact?

[00:43:42] **Kirsty High:** That's very good question. It, so it depends on the career stage, so some people just need to be introduced to the concept. I try and I don't run formal training at CEH yet. I do plan to next year, but I try to just go and talk to research groups instead, so a bit more informally, have you considered this? Is this something you're doing and I'm here? Basically, but I think the real thing that researchers tend to need training on is how to evaluate and track impact. I think that's the thing that, that is really time consuming for them. And it's something we probably all know should be done, hopefully. But it's not. It's actually not that easy to do as we all know. So I think that's the key thing that that is needed. Yeah.

[00:44:33] **Sarah McLusky:** Sean, what have you found?

[00:44:35] **Sean McCaul:** Yeah, what we've done is we've gone out and asked researchers what do you want, what do you need, and as Kirsty said, depends on what stage you're at.

[00:44:43] **Sean McCaul:** It depends sometime on the units of assessment how research intensive and how they perform in REF. Some of the units you've always done well in REF, kinda say we're fine for now. We don't need any help from you because we know what we're doing. Other staff come back saying, we just don't know what impact is.

[00:44:58] **Sean McCaul:** So we simply put on a workshop on what is impact. That simple. Our people want to understand what is impact for REF. So they're, there's another workshop. People are saying they don't understand the whole planning cycle. So we bring in like Saskia again in the past there, we brought in Mark Reid a number of years ago.

[00:45:16] **Sean McCaul:** We, we've learned from those guys. And then we build our expertise around that and deliver our own workshops. But we just go out and ask. It could be a session on pathways to impact. There's people who are trying to change policy. They have no idea where to go, where they start. So we run a workshop on how to make an impact in policy.

[00:45:33] **Sean McCaul:** So again we run several workshops a year. During the summer period, we go back out to research directors and people who've attended and people who haven't attended saying, look, we're about to programme our impact development series for next year, what do you want and we ask them the questions and normally when they have a, an input into it normally encourages a better attendance at our workshops.

[00:45:56] **Adam Lockwood:** Hiya guys, Adam NIHR. So Kirsty, I think you mentioned linking across professional services and working as a bit of a hybrid. I know as impact managers we wear numerous hats and play numerous roles within our organisations.



[00:46:12] **Adam Lockwood:** Just wondered if you've got any reflections on the opportunities value gained from working across, comms, data services, and any potential challenges working across those systems.

[00:46:23] **Kirsty High:** I think it's really important that we all work together for what the big reason is that otherwise scientists telling multiple people and they get really annoyed by that, and I understand why they get really annoyed by that.

[00:46:36] **Kirsty High:** So they're telling the comms team about something and then they tell me about something and then they tell someone else about it, and why are you guys not talking to each other? So we are trying to do that, to talk to each other a lot better to minimize what we're asking for. I also think we, we can help each other better.

[00:46:54] **Kirsty High:** So comms in particular, I think has a real role to play in communicating impact. So I think it's really important that we get those stories out there to bigger audiences than just REF or the funders. I think it's really important that we tell the public why research is important and that's what impact's all about to me. And yeah, comms have a huge role to play in that.

[00:47:13] **Sean McCaul:** Yeah, and again, because our comms team are really valuable they become more valuable. They realise now that they've a big part to play for us, and we're now in the middle of creating 30 short videos on current work that's going on. It's not for REF, but the university believes that people in the general public, whether that's across Northern Ireland, across our local areas, or UK as a whole, aren't really aware about all the great work we're doing and the impact we're making. So I say we're we plan to roll out from the next April onwards every month short videos gonna go out on LinkedIn, on Facebook and other social media channels. I would also say about working internally, part of our team, we're a small impact team, but we're part of the innovation and impact team. So I work very closely with a, there's one startup manager here, there's a commercialisation manager, there's IP manager.

[00:48:02] **Sean McCaul:** So we do talk to each other quite regularly because sometimes there's impact going on in different areas that I'm not aware of. So the startup manager may say to me, are you aware that Joe Blogs there has now started a company and we've invested in it? And he's now employing 10 staff. And I wasn't aware of that because this person was never on our radar.

[00:48:23] **Sean McCaul:** So then we make that approach saying, look, can we support you at all along the way? And, you're making an impact there on the economy impact and employment impact on whatever certain areas is. So it's just making sure we have that open conversation between ourselves internally as well. I think that helps quite a bit.

[00:48:37] **Sarah McLusky:** Thank you very much. And what a fantastic question to end on because this whole podcast is all about strength in numbers, all about profiling the amazing work that research professionals do and that they contribute to the research world. If people want to find you, get in touch, is there anywhere that you hang out or websites you would direct people to go to.

[00:49:00] **Kirsty High:** On LinkedIn? Yeah, for me, yeah.

[00:49:02] **Sarah McLusky:** So find Kirsty on LinkedIn. Sean?

[00:49:04] **Sean McCaul:** And likewise. Or the bar?

[00:49:05] **Sarah McLusky:** Oh, the bar noted. Thank you so much to everybody who is here in the audience today. Thank you for your fantastic questions and for your attention. And thank you to people listening as well to future people listening online. And thank you so much to Kirsty and Sean for sharing your stories.

[00:49:24] **Sean McCaul:** Thank you.

[00:49:28] **Sarah McLusky:** Thanks for listening to Research Adjacent. If you're listening in a podcast app, please check your subscribed and then use the links in the episode description to find full show notes and to follow the podcast on LinkedIn or Instagram. You can also find all the links and other episodes at [www.researchadjacent.com](http://www.researchadjacent.com).

[00:49:46] **Sarah McLusky:** Research Adjacent is presented and produced by Sarah McLusky, and the theme music is by Lemon Music Studios on Pixabay and you, yes you, get a big gold star for listening right to the end. See you next time.