Improving Knowledge Transfer Between Higher Education Research and Higher Education Management

Recommendations for Action

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1 Introduction

The TransForM project[1] investigates the extent to which higher education management makes use of the diverse insights generated by science and higher education research, as well as the obstacles that may arise in this process. Its goal is to identify potential areas for improving knowledge transfer between the two fields and to formulate concrete recommendations for its further development. Although the project is grounded in the German higher education and science system, its results are also relevant in international contexts, given the growing expectation that actions and decisions in scientific organizations be evidence-based, that is, guided primarily by validated knowledge rather than intuition (Prenzel & Lange 2017; Wegner et al. 2025). Science and higher education studies are recognized as an important provider of knowledge about the higher education system that meets the increasing demands of a professionalizing higher education management (WR [German Science and Humanities Council] 2014, p. 10), a development not limited to Germany. This requires that the knowledge generated by science and higher education research be communicated to the target groups in ways that ensure its reception and, ideally, its practical applicability. Additionally, within the framework of the TransForM project, this knowledge transfer is not primarily understood as the linear transmission of research-based knowledge into practice, but rather as an exchange process that involves reciprocal translations of scientifically generated results into a form that is comprehensible, accessible, and applicable for partners outside academia, and conversely translations of extra-academically generated questions and problems into research questions (WR 2016). Thus, it concerns a communication process between science and higher education research and higher education management, in which conflicts of interest and obstacles may arise, as demonstrated by the project findings.

The three-year project, funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR), is divided into three subprojects, each concluded with an individual study. Figure 1 below provides an overview of the subprojects, their objectives, and the empirical studies conducted. The first subproject analysed transfer channels and actors in higher education and science studies (Nickel & Reum 2024). The second subproject examined the reception by, and relevance of the knowledge generated for higher education management (Nickel & Reum 2025). Finally, the third subproject developed and discussed practical recommendations for the improvement of knowledge transfer (Nickel et al. 2025).

[1] TransForM stands for „Transfer von Erkenntnissen aus der Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung in das Management von Hochschulen“, i. e. the transfer of higher education and science research into the management of higher education institutions.

Figure 1: Overview of the TransForM project and its three subprojects

Subproject 1: Transfer channels and actors in higher education and science studies (August 2022 – March 2024)

Goal: Creating a topography of institutional actors in German higher education and science studies and of the channels for transfer into higher education management they used between 2020 and 2022; characterization of actors and transfer channels

Empirical studies: Desk Research; document analysis; online workshop

Subproject 2: Reception by and relevance for higher education management (January 2023 – December 2024)

Goal: Identifying which of the transfer channels analysed in subproject 1 are used by higher education management; analysing the relevance of results from higher education and science studies for the work of higher education management

Empirical studies: online survey among vice presidents/prorectors for teaching, research, and transfer, research and transfer managers, course managers and coordinators; interviews with higher education and science researchers

Subproject 3: Practical recommendations for improvement (January 2024 – July 2025)

Goal: Analysing transfer barriers and success factors; developing practical recommendations; discussion, verification, and modification of recommendations with higher education managers and researchers

Empirical studies: four online workshops with various groups of higher education managers; conference with managers and researchers

Source: CHE Centre for Higher Education 2025

This paper presents the seven key recommendations developed at the conclusion of the project. They are primarily directed towards four groups of stakeholders and aim to provide guidance and inspiration beyond the specific context of the German higher education system.

2 Recommendations for Action

The aim of the following recommendations for action is to provide concrete suggestions for improving knowledge transfer between science and higher education research and higher education management. At the beginning of each recommendation, the relevant target groups are named. This is followed by proposed courses of action and their justification. The recommendations are addressed to actors from the following four groups:

- science and higher education research
- higher education management
- networks and professional associations
- research funding bodies.

Which institutions in Germany belong to science and higher education research and which networks and professional associations exist was described in detail in the first TransForM study (Nickel & Reum 2024, pp. 15–23), drawing on various sources (BMBF *[Federal Ministry of Education and Research]* 2021; BMBF 2022; Ramirez, Beer & Pasternack 2021). In the second TransForM study, higher education management is understood to include both senior executives and individuals in middle management positions (Nickel &

Reum 2024, pp. 4–8). "Research funding" refers to third-party science and higher education research funders, with the Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR) being one of the largest.

The recommendations are aimed at actors who operate from different roles, often with differing interests and objectives. Where several actors are addressed, the recommendations are partly intended to initiate cross-sectoral discussion and, where appropriate, cooperation in implementing specific measures for improvement. Effective measures for improvement can only succeed if they are based on a shared awareness of problems as well as an understanding of each other's working practices and needs.

This idea is also pursued by the concept of co-creation, which forms a central foundation of the TransForM project. This approach assumes that complex tasks are best addressed when all those affected by a specific problem can participate on an equal footing, bringing in their individual knowledge, skills, and perspectives to work out solutions, thereby creating more sustainable results (Eckhardt & Krüger 2023, p. 83). Science and higher education research, as a largely empirical discipline with an explicit connection to the higher education and research system (WR 2014), clearly provides a wealth of practically relevant and useful findings for the work of higher education management, as demonstrated in the TransForM project (Nickel & Reum 2024). Conversely, it has also become apparent that while higher education managers generally attach high importance to science and higher education research findings for their work, they currently receive too little relevant knowledge from science and higher education research (Nickel & Reum 2025). Thus, preconditions are given and interest for improved knowledge transfer exists–what is needed now are appropriate steps towards implementation.[2]

2.1 Direct exchange and joint problem-solving

Target groups: Networks and professional associations—in particular the Science Management Network *(Netzwerk Wissenschaftsmanagement)*, FORTRAMA Network for Research and Transfer Management, GfHf *(Society for Higher Education Research)*, gwtf *(Society for Science and Technology Studies)*, the DGS *(German Sociological Association)* Section for Science and Technology Studies, the Subdivision on Science Studies within the DGfE *(German Educational Research Association)*—as well as research funding bodies, in particular the BMFTR *(Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space)*

Recommendations: Knowledge transfer between science and higher education research and higher education management will only improve if problems and solutions in this context are directly discussed. Such **exchanges** should take place regularly in order to respond to current developments and changing needs. Professional associations and networks of science and higher education research and higher education management are particularly called upon here, but the BMFTR also plays an important role as a central third-party funder, since it also operates its own nationwide information platform on the subject[3].

The BMFTR could assume a nationwide **coordinating role** in the dialogue between science and higher education research and higher education management, for example by hosting a dialogue forum for an initial stocktaking exercise and later for **reflecting** on the results achieved so far. Professional associations and networks, in turn, could foster exchange through their **annual conferences, journals, and newsletters**, and develop and implement joint projects to improve knowledge transfer.

The circle of addressees mentioned above is extensive and covers associations and networks from higher education research, science studies, and higher education management, and may not even be complete. It should therefore be decided on a case-by-case basis which stakeholders to include. Moreover, it is unlikely that there will be permanent exchange between all those actors. In most cases,

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[2] Findings and conclusions similar to those of the TransForM study were also made in the research project on the „Knowledge transfer between science and higher education research and ministries of education and research" („Wissenstransfer zwischen der Wissenschafts- und Hochschulforschung und den Wissenschaftsministerien" (WiHoWiT)) that is conducted by the TU Dortmund (Dortmund University) and HIS Institute for Higher Education Development (HIS-HE) and funded by the BMFTR. In this field, knowledge transfer also needs to be improved (Möller et al. 2025; Würmseer & Möller 2025).

[3] For more information, see https://www.science and higher educationforschung.de/science and higher educationforschung/de/home/home_node.html

communication will rather take place in smaller, decentralised groups. What matters, however, is that the key players actively approach one another–which requires **initiative and responsibilities**.

Justification: Research conducted in the TransForM project has shown that science and higher education research and higher education management rarely come into contact. Although there is awareness of each other's field, knowledge about it remains limited. This became evident in the online survey of higher education managers, the online workshops, and interviews with higher education researchers. Particularly on the part of higher education management, there is a frequent wish for improved personal exchange on an equal footing, as this takes better account of the specific circumstances of individual institutions than general publications.

2.2 Creating orientation for higher education management

Target groups: Science and higher education research, higher education management, intermediaries at the interface between science and higher education research and higher education management[4], networks and professional associations of science and higher education research and higher education management, research funding bodies, particularly the BMFTR

Recommendations: Tools should be provided to enable higher education managers to locate science and higher education research findings in a targeted way. A distinction should be made between the development and implementation of **tools** requiring substantial personnel and technical resources and those that can be implemented with relatively little effort. For the former, the BMFTR and other funders such as foundations or the Stifterverband[5] could provide **incentives** in the form of programmes or individual projects with appropriate funding.

Initial ideas for this were developed in online workshops with higher education managers during the TransForM project with the aim of developing measures for improvement. One frequently mentioned idea was the creation of a regularly published, curated **newsletter** presenting new science and higher education research studies relevant to higher education management, with short summaries and links to sources for deeper reading. Publishing such a newsletter would require new responsibilities and dedicated staff for development, implementation, and ongoing operation.

Alternatively, or additionally, **AI** could be deployed, e. g. in the form of a chatbot. On request of higher education managers, such a chatbot could identify suitable science and higher education research literature and data sources. Developing and implementing such a system would require cooperation between science and higher education researchers, higher education managers, and AI specialists, with the AI having to be trained and equipped with relevant search functions. Another possible measure would be to establish an **online repository**—a publicly accessible platform with search functions tailored to the needs of higher education management. Users could, among others, contribute by rating the relevance of science and higher education research results for different areas (online evaluation).

Another proposal is to publish research-based **practical handbooks or textbooks** for higher education managers in order to channel and summarise the flood of information from science and higher education research. When selecting topics, however, attention must be paid to the fact that the interests of science and higher education researchers and those of higher education managers differ significantly (Recommendation 2.3). The preparation of such publications might require funding—if demand from higher education managers is sufficient, they could be financed through sales.

A low-effort measure that does not require additional resources and could be implemented immediately is to improve the **visibility of existing transfer channels** between science and higher

[4] In this context, "intermediaries" refers to institutions that work with a research and evidence focus and have know-how in the field of science and higher education research as well as in higher education management, like DZHW (German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies), HIS-HE or CHE Centre for Higher Education (Würmseer & Möller 2025).

[5] For more, information, see https://www.stifterverband.org/english

education research and higher education management. For instance, the annual conferences of the Netzwerk Wissenschaftsmanagement and FORTRAMA could provide targeted information on available science and higher education research access points and how they can be used. Conversely, annual conferences of science and higher education research associations and networks could raise awareness of the fact that higher education management has a strong interest in findings useful for its work. It should be highlighted which channels are most effective for reaching this group.

Justification: A wide range of actors operate in science and higher education research with varying intensity and publish through different transfer channels. While positive for the field's development, this creates complexity and lack of transparency from a user's perspective, making it difficult to access the wealth of research findings. No entities or tools currently exist to support users in navigating this information jungle. Users must identify suitable transfer channels and information sources themselves.

At the same time, the national survey of higher education managers also showed that many of the transfer channels used by science and higher education research for disseminating findings are little known or used by higher education managers. As a result, they often do not know where to find suitable information, particularly with regard to academic publications. The lack of awareness and the complexity of transfer channels are also seen as major obstacles to knowledge transfer.

2.3 Preparing research findings for target groups

Target groups: Science and higher education research, public relations and/or science communication offices in higher education institutions or research institutes, research funding bodies, particularly the BMFTR

Recommendations: Science and higher education researchers should assess which groups outside the scientific community could be interested in their findings, explicitly including higher education management. The relevant results should be prepared in a way tailored to these target groups' interests, i. e. to the **interests of higher education managers,** and communicated via channels they regularly use.

To determine which **topics** are of current interest to higher education management, suitable sources such as practice-oriented journals, conference discussions, or direct dialogue with higher education managers should be consulted. For findings deemed relevant for higher education management, it should be specified which **hierarchy levels** (senior/middle) and which **functional areas** (teaching and learning, research, transfer, finance, HR, university development, quality assurance, marketing, public relations, etc.) should be addressed, with what information and key messages.

Written **preparation** should follow, with the form determined by the relevant transfer channel (Recommendation 2.4). Beforehand, it must be clarified who in the research team is in charge of transfer and if **support** for these tasks can be provided in-house, e.g. by PR or science communication offices. These units could assist not only with preparing written outputs but also with selecting transfer channels and communicating results.

Visibility of publications or news on the internet/via **search engines** is another factor. Here, optimisation aimed at higher education management is necessary, supported by institutional PR or science communication offices. Visibility is crucial, not only but in particular against the background of the **growing use of AI**.

Webinars have already proven effective as instruments for transfer between science and higher education research and higher education management. For example, between May and July 2025, the TransForM project piloted a series entitled *"Higher Education Research Meets Higher Education Management"*. In four sessions, respectively, a science and higher education researcher presented relevant findings, which were then commented on by a higher education manager and then discussed with all

participants[6]. The BMFTR also offers a similar format entitled "Lunch Talks," though these talks are not specifically tailored to higher education management[7]. With that said, the ministry could consider tailoring parts of its information offer to this target group to contribute to a better knowledge transfer between science and higher education research and higher education management.

Justification: The analysis of transfer channels between science and higher education research and higher education management showed that information is rarely prepared with target groups in mind. Publications usually provide science and higher education research findings that users may or may not engage with. Whether print or social media—both areas mainly rely on an intrinsic motivation to look for relevant know-how. The specific needs of groups such as higher education management are often overlooked, and scientific findings are not specifically prepared for this target group.

Yet, 63% of higher education managers surveyed considered research findings generally important for their work. Thus, there is a demand. However, only 42% rated the findings provided by science and higher education research as "highly" or "mostly relevant." This reveals a gap. The choice of topics also plays an important role. Whether the science and higher education research content provided via transfer channels is considered relevant by higher education management, mainly depends on the question if the topics dealt with are of interest. The survey results show that the topics of science and higher education research publications rarely overlap with the current needs of higher education managers. The results also show that uptake varies by hierarchy level: vice-presidents/pro-rectors use science and higher education research much more than middle managers, which means that mid-level higher education managers need to be addressed differently from top-level managers.

2.4 Using shorter formats and social media

Target groups: Science and higher education research, public relations and/or science communication offices in universities or research institutes

Recommendations: Information for higher education managers should preferably be disseminated through channels offering shorter texts—practice-oriented journals, conference input, short papers, newsletters, online portals, and social media. Shorter texts meet the time constraints of higher education managers, offering a first impression of relevance of the findings presented before engaging more deeply.

Social media has great potential to improve the knowledge transfer between science and higher education research and higher education management. **Business networks** such as LinkedIn are particularly effective for addressing higher education managers, but **microblogging services, online portals, blogs, and podcasts** also offer opportunities depending on the target group. Social media can generate interest and serve as a bridge to less familiar repositories of research findings. A suggested **communication chain**: a short teaser post, a link to a concise publication, and responding to feedback in comments—fostering a productive dialogue between science and higher education research and higher education management.

Before choosing communication channels, (higher education) institutions should check which online and social media accounts they already operate, and which ones should actually be used. Social media is primarily **person-to-person**, so individuals must be visible. Against this background, concepts like that of the "**corporate influencer**" have emerged, where one or two colleagues in the research institution act

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[6] Records of the four webinars of the CHE series can be found on YouTube (in German). TALK 1: Knowledge-based higher education management – How higher education research findings are used in practice: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJmTXm7YdUQ. TALK 2: Artificial Intelligence in higher education teaching – Current research and implementation: https://youtu.be/KkpRV-ws_oM. TALK 3: Knowledge transfer of non-state higher education institutions – Specifics and lessons learned: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K75IeJYPxLM. TALK 4: Conditions for a career in academia – Demographic change as a challenge for personnel development and planning: https://youtu.be/pZEQoPqbBik

[7] For more information, see https://www.science and higher educationforschung.de/science and higher educationforschung/de/transfer/lunchtalks/lunchtalks_node.html

as communicators and represent the institution externally. **PR** and communication offices can support this and should proactively approach science and higher education researchers to jointly develop social media strategies and offer help with their implementation.

Justification: The results of the national online survey conducted within the TransForM project show that higher education managers mainly use transfer channels providing short, practice-oriented, and accessible information. When consulting science and higher education research findings, most higher education managers (36.1%) primarily look for them in practice-oriented journals, followed by papers and short publications, newsletters, and online portals (over 33%). With 28.9% reading posts on LinkedIn or X/Twitter, social media can also be regarded as a main source of information for higher education managers.

The previously conducted content analysis of channels used by science and higher education research and higher education management also revealed significant untapped potential for knowledge transfer in social media, covering microblogging services as well as online portals, blogs, podcasts, and newsletters. All these platforms are generally low-threshold. A key factor in higher education managers' preference for shorter texts is time shortage, consistent across hierarchy levels: 49.9% of the surveyed vice-presidents and prorectors and 50.9% of middle managers reported to have little time for reading science and higher education research publications.

2.5 Strengthening cooperation in the research process

Target groups: Science and higher education research, higher education management

Recommendations: There are two **main points of intersection** in the research process where stronger cooperation between science and higher education research and higher education management would be valuable: at the beginning, when developing topics, and at the end, when **interpreting results** and deriving **recommendations for action**. Where suitable, science and higher education researchers should involve experienced higher education managers at these points. It goes without saying that not every project is suitable for such a cooperation, but the **option** should always be considered. Therefore, it should be explored where there are questions of common interest to foster genuine co-creation.

Higher education managers could also help **refine/complement research questions** from a practice perspective to increase the usability of results. This recommendation does not mean research should be dictated by higher education management interests, nor that application-orientation should be forced. Content and methodology remain the **sole responsibility** of researchers. Instead, the focus should be on exchange and collaboration at suitable points which could be supported by specific formats, e. g. **workshops** where researchers present central findings and then develop recommendations together with higher education managers in moderated discussions.[8]

Justification: Higher education managers currently rate cooperation with science and higher education research as only "satisfactory" and want more involvement in formulating research questions and deriving recommendations. Both the online survey and the workshops with higher education managers showed that most higher education managers would regard improved cooperation with science and higher education research as very useful. It could help increase thematic overlap and practical relevance of science and higher education research for higher education management.

Conversely, the empirical findings also reveal a clear need for improvement from the science and higher education research perspective: in interviews, the experts reported that cooperation with higher education management needed to be improved. In this context, among others, they mentioned

[8] Practical examples include (but are not limited to) workshops with higher education managers in the context of the TransForM project (Nickel et al. 2025, p. 6, or the KaWuM research project (KaWuM = Career Paths and Qualification Requirements in Science and Higher Education Management) (Janson 2025).

challenges with different ways of working as well as a sometimes too hierarchical way of thinking on part of higher education management and an erratic and highly individual interest in cooperating with science and higher education research.

2.6 Promoting evidence orientation in higher education management

Target groups: Senior executives in higher education institutions, middle higher education management

Recommendations: Executives and middle management in higher education institutions should recognise science and higher education research's potential to support **daily processes** and **meet new challenges** with scientific evidence. Engagement with science and higher education research and its results should therefore become a routine part of work. Awareness of the value of research already exists in higher education management, but the specific benefits of the use of findings must be actively conveyed to foster an **evidence-oriented working culture**.

It has become apparent that encouraging in particular the mid-level higher education management to take scientific findings into account is important. Accordingly, exchange via relevant publications should be supported by executives. Moreover, knowledge transfer activities with science and higher education research should generally be recognised as a performance dimension of higher education management for the purpose of co-creation.

Executives should provide staff with the **freedom to engage with research findings**, including time during work to do so, at all levels of higher education management. Participation in conferences or other **exchange formats** with science and higher education researchers, as well as **training opportunities**, should be supported, enabling broader reception of research findings in higher education management. Training should not only deliver task-specific know-how from science and higher education research but also provide broader knowledge in direct contact with science and higher education researchers.

Permanent positions and career paths should be established. Staff with long-term employment and development prospects ensure knowledge remains within higher education institutions. Thus, investing in the development of their employees' competences becomes more profitable for the institutions. Conversely, middle higher education managers should also demand more freedom to engage with research.

Justification: 42% of the surveyed higher education managers considered knowledge transfer with science and higher education research at least "mostly relevant" for higher education management. Thus, the view that scientific evidence is central is not yet shared by the majority. In the interviews conducted in the TransForM project, experts emphasised that executives played a central role when it comes to being open towards and appreciating science and higher education research and its findings as an element of working culture. Viewed separately, the share of respondents for whom knowledge transfer with science and higher education research is highly relevant is considerably higher among executives.

To increase evidence orientation in higher education management and in order to be able to handle transfer in addition to routine tasks, higher education managers need time but also the support of executives who allow for and also demand engagement with science and higher education research. Respondents also often wish for better resources for higher education management, so that permanent posts can be created and clearer career paths can be established. Plus, it should be more attractive to engage in transfer activities to support and recognise this field.

2.7 Establishing Institutional Research as a research approach

Target groups: Higher education management, science and higher education research, professional associations and networks, research funding bodies, particularly the BMFTR

Recommendations: Institutional Research projects in higher education management generate many scientifically grounded, **application-oriented** findings. This approach, which uses academic methods to produce **internal data** and well-founded insights, is widely practised in some areas of higher education management.

So far, however, it has not been recognised as an independent research approach in science and higher education research, but mainly as a management tool to prepare for internal decision-making or institutional development[9]. Yet, TransForM findings show that Institutional Research often produces **generalisable insights** that could be valuable to other higher education institutions, e.g. through publication in practice-oriented journals.

This does not necessarily mean higher education managers should regard themselves as researchers, but they can nevertheless contribute to science and higher education research. Higher education managers engaged in Institutional Research should network more closely with science and higher education researchers, acting as **bridge-builders**. Executives in higher education institutions should also recognise and support the potential of Institutional Research not only for internal tasks but also for knowledge transfer. Higher education researchers, their networks and associations should likewise consider giving **greater attention** to selected results in academic contexts.

Justification: Institutional Research results generated and published by higher education managers were found in great numbers when transfer channels were analysed. Thus, higher education management is not only the subject of science and higher education research but also active in this field, with the content of published documents relating to application-oriented questions. Moreover, the results of the TransForM project survey in German higher education management show that around half of the respondents had already participated in Institutional Research projects. However, as a research field, Institutional Research is still underappreciated both in the higher education segment in general as well as in science and higher education research in particular.

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[9] Institutional Research has actually become more relevant for higher education research (Wannenmacher 2025), but the focus is still primarily on its function as a tool for the institutions' internal gain of findings and for higher education institution management (Auferkorte-Michaelis & Hintze 2023).

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