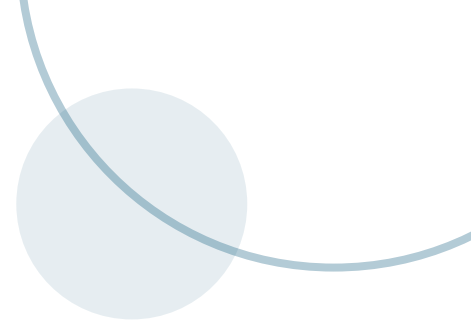




UNIVERSITÄT
ZU KÖLN



The Cologne Model

Proactive Transfer Scouting as a Key Factor for Successful
Start-up Universities – Impulses for Dialogue





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Preface

The social mission of the University of Cologne encompasses much more than excellent research and teaching: we see ourselves as active shapers of a knowledge-based, innovative society. The transfer of scientific knowledge to business, politics, culture, and civil society is a central pillar of our university's development.

By establishing transfer scouts in all faculties, we have created a model that systematically, visibly, and effectively anchors transfer. This white paper impressively demonstrates how the scouts build bridges—between disciplines, between science and practice, between ideas and their implementation. It documents the experiences gained from five years of funding by the state-based grant program “Excellence Start-up Center.NRW”. This white paper offers valuable insights for universities that want to further their own transfer structures, with a particular focus on initiating knowledge-based spin-offs where appropriate.

I would like to thank everyone involved, especially the transfer scouts, for their commitment and innovative spirit. Together, we are strengthening the role of the University of Cologne as a dynamic partner in research, business, and society—and helping to ensure that knowledge has an impact.



Prof. Dr. Werner Reinartz

Vice Rector for Transfer to Society

University of Cologne

1 Context and objectives

Transfer is one of the three core tasks of German universities—and is becoming increasingly important as a connecting element between research, teaching, and society. In practice, however, it is often not yet on an equal footing with research and teaching but is sometimes treated as secondary in terms of its relevance and institutional anchoring. Yet transfer is a performance dimension closely linked to research and teaching (University of Cologne 2024) that contributes significantly to translating scientific findings into social, economically, and culturally effective solutions.

Research and teaching form the basis for transfer activities. Similarly, integrating transfer content into teaching contributes significantly to promoting so-called future skills—such as **entrepreneurial thinking, problem-solving skills, interdisciplinary collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication skills, and self-efficacy**. These skills are considered key prerequisites for effectively translating scientific findings into social and economic innovations. At the same time, engaging in entrepreneurship can increase scientists' inclination to explore new areas (Fini et al. 2022). A close link between research, teaching, and transfer, as well as the promotion of an entrepreneurial mindset among scientists, can be a decisive success factor for the universities of the future.

Today, transfer is often understood as “transfer to society,” which the German Council of Science and Humanities also formulates as a comprehensive mission in its position paper—far beyond classic technology transfer (German Council of Science and Humanities 2016). The term “technology transfer” refers to the identification, protection, and marketing of university research results. In this way, research results can be converted into business opportunities, for example. Technology transfer from universities can also be viewed as a commercial activity whose benefits go well beyond the opportunity to earn money (Hockaday 2020).

With the establishment of **transfer scouts** in all six of its faculties, the University of Cologne (UzK) has built up structures that meet the diverse requirements of knowledge and technology transfer and, in particular, support research-based start-up projects. The findings presented here are based on the extensive experience of the University of Cologne's transfer scouts, which has been gathered since 2019 as part of the state-based funding program “**Excellence Start-up Center.NRW**” (ESC).

The aim of this white paper is to ~~use these findings to~~ encourage an open and sustainable exchange of experiences with other transfer actors and to document our own *Lessons Learned*.

The target audience is transfer and start-up actors at German universities as well as members of university management who wish to further develop transfer structures and anchor them institutionally.

The further development and professionalization of transfer structures at German universities is a key task for the future. It requires exchange, cooperation, and institutional learning across university boundaries. This white paper aims to contribute to making practical insights usable and to provide joint impetus—for effective science and a knowledge-based society.

2 General conditions in Germany

The demands placed on universities have increased significantly in recent years: in addition to research and teaching, politicians and society increasingly expect scientific findings to be translated into social and economic applications in order to contribute to the economic development of Germany and Europe through science-based innovations. A lack of professionalization and resources, fragmented responsibilities, and a lack of incentives are hindering the transfer of knowledge and technology in many places. In particular, science-based start-ups often fail early on because there is a lack of structured processes and tailored support for the journey from research idea to start-up project.

Universities sometimes offer activities that are ideally suited to this purpose but lack the resources or appreciation for implementing transfer projects (University of Cologne 2024). Well-known obstacles for academic staff at universities include a lack of financial and human resources for transfer activities and a lack of incentives. For universities, the challenge is to reconcile their traditional tasks in teaching and research with the newer requirements of knowledge and technology transfer (Belitski & Sikorski 2024).

Initial concepts and approaches for transfer scouting exist at several German universities. Corresponding structures have been created, for example, as part of "Excellence-Start-up-Center.NRW" or the federal-funding program "Innovative Universities". In discussions with representatives from universities in Germany and abroad, recurring, systemic challenges are mentioned that make it difficult to establish successful transfer scouting: temporary projects and positions, a lack of permanent anchoring of transfer scouting structures, unclear job profiles, and low professionalization of the activity.

3 Initial situation at the University of Cologne

3.1 Structure and characteristics of the University of Cologne

The University of Cologne is a **comprehensive university** with six faculties: Arts and Humanities, Human Sciences, Law, Management Economics and Social Sciences, Mathematics and Natural Sciences, and Medicine.

Unlike many universities and colleges of applied sciences, it does not offer engineering courses, which elsewhere often form the basis for technology-oriented start-ups.

Of the approximately **44,000 students** (as of the 2024/25 winter semester), about a quarter are studying to become **teachers**, while the humanities and social sciences faculties account for more than a third of the student body with around 18,000 students. This subject structure has a particular impact on the transfer landscape at the University of Cologne and requires a broad, interdisciplinary understanding of transfer that takes equal account of technological, social, and cultural innovation potential.

3.2 Transfer concept and transfer structure of the University of Cologne

For the University of Cologne, transfer is a mutual, dynamic process that goes far beyond providing support for patents, licenses, or spin-offs. It is supported by the entire university: researchers, teachers, staff, and students (University of Cologne 2025, *Transfer*). Various internal stakeholders are involved in the area of transfer, coordinating their activities closely with one another:

The task of the *Vice-Rectorate for Transfer to Society*, created in 2023, is to formulate, implement, and further develop the university-wide transfer strategy. The goal is to systematically anchor transfer thinking, processes, and activities, to integrate them with research and teaching, and to proactively synchronize them with the university's development plans (University of Cologne 2025, *Vice Rector for Transfer to Society*).

The *Transfer Office* is part of the Vice-Rectorate for Transfer. It supports the faculties and institutions in implementing the University of Cologne's transfer strategy. It coordinates transfer activities across departments and faculties and ensures networking with central offices. Through close cooperation with the transfer scouts, the Transfer Office is networked with the faculties and *Gateway Excellence Start-up Center* (University of Cologne, 2025, *Transfer Office*).

The *Transfer Department*, which is part of the university administration, offers comprehensive advice on topics related to intellectual property, licensing, inventions and patents, services related to the acquisition of application-oriented funding, and the preparation and handling of collaborations with industry (University of Cologne 2025, *Research Management*).

Gateway Excellence Start-up Center (Gateway ESC) is a central operating unit of the University of Cologne and, as a university start-up center, supports the establishment of companies, including those from the scientific community, and works closely with the aforementioned institutions. The transfer scouts of the Gateway ESC are active at the interface with all the aforementioned stakeholders within the University of Cologne as well as with the faculties.

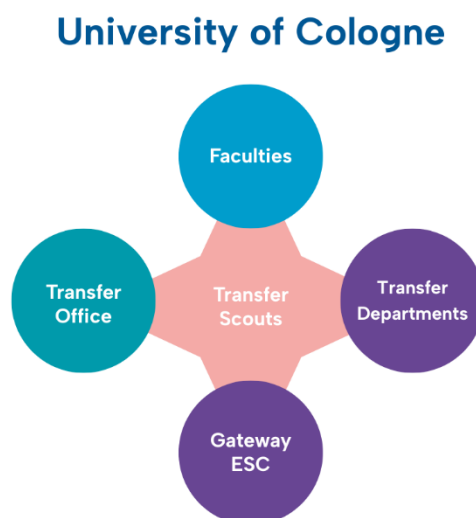


Fig. 1: Interfaces between transfer scouts and international transfer stakeholders.

Fig. 1: Interfaces between transfer scouts and internal transfer stakeholders.

The wide variety of actors as well as specialist disciplines present both a challenge and a chance: This requires a differentiated understanding of transfer, which addresses both scientific excellence and

social impact. It positions the UoC as a whole, as an active actor within the regional and national innovation ecosystem.

3.3 Excellence Start-up Center.NRW – Impulse and starting point

Until September 2019, the only entities that existed among the aforementioned players were the Transfer Department and a start-up service with limited capacity of 1.5 staff posts. This meant that support was primarily available for student activities in the field of start-ups, while spin-off projects from the scientific community could not be actively identified.

As an **Excellence Start-up Center.NRW**, the University of Cologne received comprehensive third-party funding from the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) since in 2019, to systematically strengthen start-up activities from universities and establish sustainable structures to support spin-offs.

Thanks to ESC funding, **Gateway Excellence Start-up Center** has succeeded in establishing sustainable structures for raising awareness, providing training, and supporting start-up projects (Gateway Excellence Start-up Center n.d.). Since then, students and researchers have deliberately been made aware of the subject of start-ups and have been supported at all stages from idea development to market readiness.

Transfer scouts play a crucial role in this process: they support researchers and students in developing project ideas, applying for funding (e.g., Go-Bio initial, EXIST research transfer), and transitioning to further support structures within the Gateway ESC and the university.

Funding by the state of North Rhine-Westphalia will expire at the end of 2025. Thanks to the **availability of permanent budgetary resources**, the activities of the transfer scouts can be continued to a large extent as **matrix positions** (see 3.4). Three of the six faculties finance permanent transfer scouting positions with their own budgets (jointly with the Gateway ESC), while two other faculties initially finance fixed-term part-time positions. The faculties' proportional funds are used for activities that lead to (transfer) results outside of start-ups. Gateway ESC's proportional funds continue to finance the scouts' activities in support of spin-offs. The Faculty of Medicine has even set up its own transfer department. In coordination with the Vice-Rectorate for Transfer to Society, in future the scouts will provide increased support for transfer activities across the board. This has increased the willingness of the faculties to participate in the financing of the positions.

3.4 Structure and anchoring of the transfer scouts

As part of the ESC funding, the **transfer scouts** were deployed as **matrix positions** between faculties and the Gateway Excellence Start-up Center, meaning that they spent 50% of their working time in the faculty and 50% at Gateway. This dual anchoring proved challenging and coordination-intensive at first. However, it can now be considered a success factor: the matrix structure enabled the scouts to be firmly integrated into faculty structures and communication channels, to work in close proximity to researchers and students, and at the same time to cooperate closely with colleagues from the start-up coaching, event, and network departments of the Gateway ESC.

Operating at the interfaces between faculties, central administration, Gateway, and external partners fundamentally requires a high degree of communication skills, strategic thinking, and

stakeholder management competence. Successful networking contributes significantly to transparency and cooperation between the groups of actors involved.

Currently the transfer scouts are structurally assigned to the **Vice-Rectorate for Transfer to Society**. In terms of content and strategy, they are managed by **Gateway Excellence Start-up Center** and the **faculties**. In addition, there is close cooperation with the **Transfer Department** and the **Transfer Office**.

3.5 Discussions with faculties and development of faculty-specific strategies

Right at the start of the ESC project, discussions with the deans of all faculties revealed that the term “transfer” was understood very differently within the University of Cologne. Ideas about what transfer is and what significance it has alongside research and teaching varied greatly. Start-up support as a sub-area of transfer was often seen as a relevant topic for students, but not for scientists.

Given this background, the first transfer scouts started in mid-2020. It soon became clear that start-ups and transfer are also relevant topics for researchers, especially where funding programs at the state, federal, or EU level support implementation. One of the scouts' key tasks was to provide support with applications for **transfer and validation programs**, in close cooperation with other university service facilities. The basis for their success was building trust through low-threshold contacts and tailored advice.

At the same time, the faculties began to address the topic of transfer more systematically. For example, the **Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences** initiated a cross-faculty strategy process with the help of transfer scouts, accompanied by the introduction of a **transfer officer** from the professorial staff based in the dean's office. In the **Faculty of Arts and Humanities**, a survey on the definition and significance of transfer, developed in collaboration with the dean's office, led to a high response rate and provided valuable impetus for strategic development.

With the **establishment of the Vice-Rectorate for Transfer to Society**, responsibilities and roles were defined, for example through the creation of **Vice-Dean's Offices for Transfer and Innovation** within the faculties. As the transfer scout positions became more permanent, the strategic focus was sharpened in collaboration with the deans' offices: an initially uniform job profile developed into a **faculty-specific transfer scout profile** tailored to the respective strengths and needs of the faculties, which today contributes significantly to the professionalization and further development of the transfer culture.

3.6 Duties and roles of transfer scouts

Transfer scouts at the University of Cologne identify innovative projects and support them in collaboration with other experts from Gateway ESC and other internal UoC institutions until they are implemented, e.g., in the form of a start-up. Scouts uncover potential and make it visible, thereby providing valuable services for the university's transfer activities. They support faculty and university management in their efforts to increase the type and scope of transfer activities at the University of Cologne. Scouts act as conceptual input providers for transfer activities at the collaborative research centers and clusters of excellence, as well as for individual suitable projects from these areas.

Roles of transfer scouts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambassador and translator for transfer in the faculties • Critical Friend • Motivator and enabler • Facilitator and guide in innovation processes • Easy-to-connect partner: low-threshold contact in the faculties for questions about transfer • Network connector – networker for validation contacts 	Duties of transfer scouts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project scouting and support • Awareness und Ideation methods • Training in innovation methods for scientists and students • Support with transfer-related funding programs • Building industry-specific networks • Mapping transfer potential • Strategic input on transfer issues
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Fig. 2: Roles and duties of transfer scouts.

4 Impact of scouting activities

The transfer scouts' activities extend into various areas. They form interfaces with the transfer actors at the University of Cologne in the narrower sense (see chapter 3.4) and at the same time network with numerous other areas within the university where transfer activities arise. Starting in the faculties, their work extends to the various levels of the university and beyond to the innovation ecosystem in Cologne and North Rhine-Westphalia.

There, they contribute to connecting science, business, administration, and civil society and strengthen the university's visibility as an active transfer partner in the region. This creates a dynamic field of activity that originates from the faculties. The experience gained in Cologne is also recognized beyond the region and is incorporated, for example, into events organized by the TransferAllianz or the EU Cooperation Office of Science Organizations (KoWi), as well as into international conferences and qualification programs, such as the University Industry Innovation Network (UIIN) and the African Institute of Mathematical Sciences (AIMS).

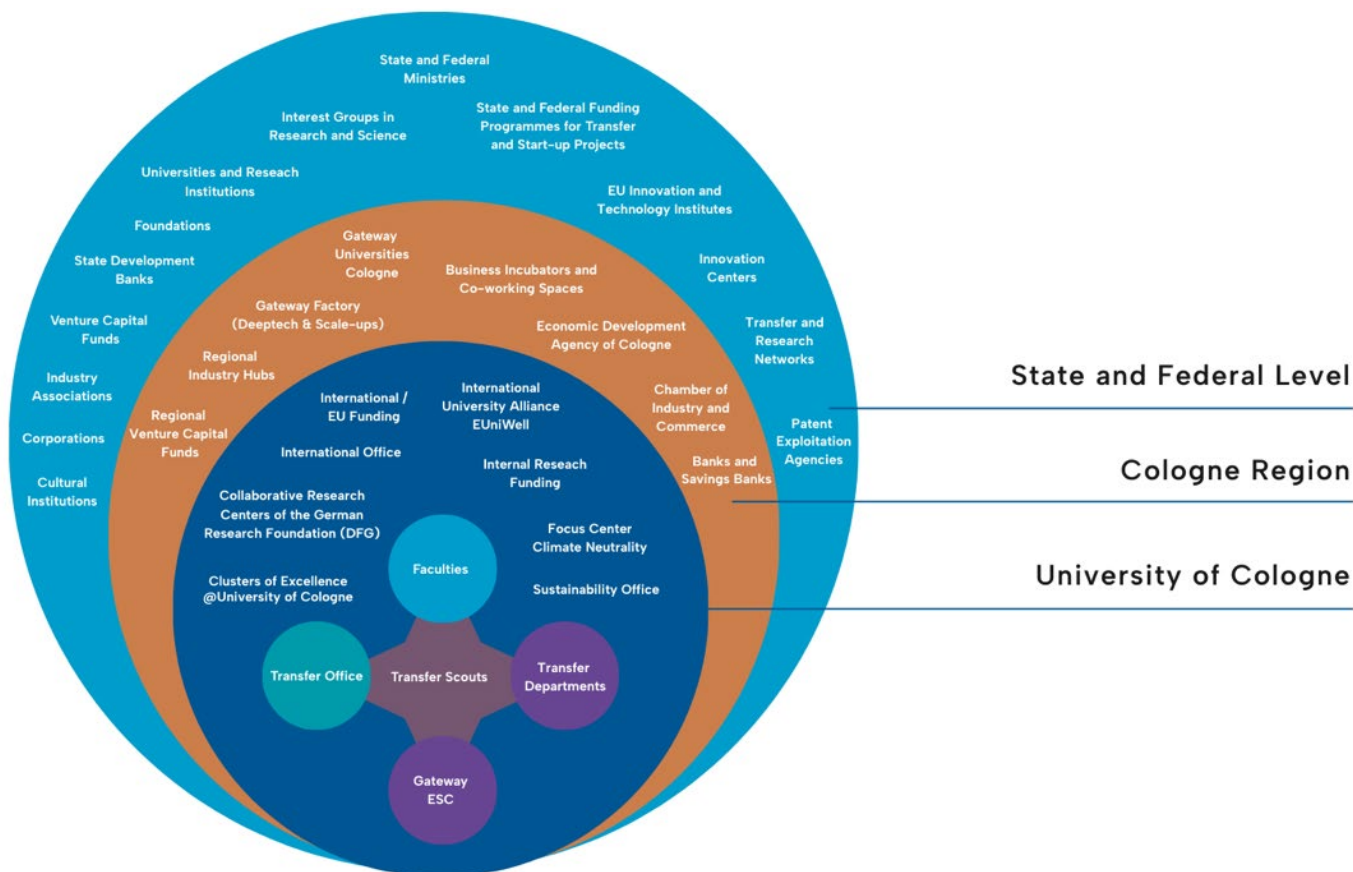


Fig. 3: Areas of influence and networking of transfer scouts. Examples of institutions and stakeholders; the illustration is not exhaustive.

5 Experiences and challenges: Active transfer scouting

Building trust and understanding roles

A key experience for transfer scouts concerns the need to build trust and clarify their own role within the faculties. As new interface actors, they move between research, administration, and central institutions—and often must make their tasks and added value known first. In some cases, there was initial reluctance or skepticism about the new job profile, especially when it was unclear whether scouting was more of a supporting, evaluating, or steering role. Through continuous presence, transparent communication, and addressing faculty-specific issues, this trust was gradually strengthened. Experience shows that transfer scouting is most effective when it is understood as a collaborative process and actively shaped by faculty members.

Resources and time capacities

A recurring theme is the balancing act between the breadth and depth of activities. Transfer scouts must keep an eye on many specialist areas on the one hand, while on the other hand allowing sufficient time for in-depth discussions, project development, and individual support. These areas of tension show that sustainable transfer scouting requires clear prioritization and sufficient human resources.

Structural and organizational challenges

Transfer scouting operates in a complex organizational environment. Different faculty structures, decision-making processes, and responsibilities require tailored forms of communication and cooperation. Approaching individual researchers can be particularly challenging in large or decentralized departments. In addition, research and transfer activities are often not systematically recorded or documented, which makes it difficult to identify existing potential. Transfer scouts therefore report that close coordination with relevant institutions—such as research funding, start-up services, or public relations—is necessary to exploit synergies and avoid duplicate structures.

Different understandings of transfer

The faculties have very different understandings of transfer. While technological applications, patents, or start-ups are often the focus in the natural and life sciences, the humanities and social sciences see transfer more in terms of social impact, discourse, or cultural innovation. This broad spectrum opens opportunities: it shows that transfer can take many forms and that universities are thus able to expand their impact both in society and in the economy.

The importance of visibility and presence

The geographical and organizational proximity of the transfer scouts to the faculties proved to be crucial. Low-threshold encounters, whether in the faculty hallway, through newsletter articles, or faculty-specific events, lower inhibitions and create spaces for exchange about potential transfer ideas.

Language and terminology

Transfer scouting revealed that the faculties differ not only in their research topics and areas of focus, but also in their preferred language. While value-oriented and socially embedded terms resonate more strongly in the humanities and social sciences, the natural sciences and economics more frequently resort to entrepreneurial or technological terminology. These different linguistic worlds are an expression of professional cultures and self-perceptions. Added to this are the differences between German and English (technical) language in publications and the international background of many scientists. Successful transfer scouting takes this diversity into account by adapting its approach and choice of words to each faculty, thus creating trust and common ground.

Recording and visualization of transfer activities

Another recurring concern is the challenge of systematically recording and highlighting transfer achievements. Many activities, particularly those with a social or cultural impact, take place informally and are rarely reflected in university reporting. Transfer scouts act as translators and bridge builders here: they help to identify and document such achievements and incorporate them into university-wide transfer communication. In the long term, this contributes to establishing a more comprehensive understanding of transfer in the sense of a culture of sharing.

6 Conclusion

Proactive transfer scouting, which is connected with non-university actors, not only increases the visibility of research activities, but also gives scientists direct access to effectively transfer their results to the market. The strategic integration of transfer scouts in all six faculties of the University

of Cologne, who also work together as part of one department within Gateway ESC, also helps to **intensify interdisciplinary exchange** and provide new impetus, including support for start-ups.

The creation of positions for transfer scouts can contribute to a significant increase in transfer output from scientific institutions. A visible result at the University of Cologne is an increase in the number of successful applications in transfer funding programs, a growing number of research-based start-ups, and an overall stronger start-up culture.

Considerations regarding the introduction of transfer scouts should take existing structures at universities into account. Important initial questions regarding the status quo of activities in the field of transfer include:

- What significance does transfer have for the overall organization of the university, alongside research and teaching?
- How is the topic addressed by the university management?
- Is there a uniform understanding of transfer?
- Are there already active transfer actors at the level of the overall organization, the faculties, among scientists, or as central institutions?
- What are the overarching objectives and added value sought with the transfer activities?

At the University of Cologne, these questions had not yet been conclusively clarified when funding for the Gateway Excellence Start-up Center began, and the transfer scouts were created. By focusing on start-up creation as a sub-discipline of transfer, Gateway has since contributed significantly to a systematic examination of these issues.

Through the work of Gateway ESC, students and researchers in many faculties have become more aware of the topics of transfer and entrepreneurship for the first time. When the faculties were first approached during the application phase for ESC funding, the above questions were rarely addressed or could only be answered superficially. The term “transfer scouting” was interpreted in different ways. For the faculties, the introduction of scouts seemed like an opportunity to address the topic in its entirety at the faculty. As the start-up center of the UoC, Gateway has primarily focused on generating spin-off projects from research based on the success factors (known as key performance indicators) defined within the framework of ESC funding. The starting point was to be a general awareness of the topic of transfer and the targeted identification of research projects with spin-off potential. In the course of consolidating the structures (see chapter 3.3), the term “transfer scout and spin-off coach” is now used.

Gateway ESC initially assumed that the framework conditions and success factors for transfer scouting would be comparable across all faculties. It was only as the scouts' activities progressed and scouting was gradually introduced in all faculties that differences became apparent, along with the resulting challenges and opportunities (see also Chapter 5).

Before introducing transfer scouts in a matrix structure, it is advisable to thoroughly examine the above-mentioned and other relevant questions. All existing stakeholders should be involved in this process. If a matrix function is to be carried out by central institutions with individual faculties, it is advisable to develop a customized transfer scout profile with the faculties/departments.

The transfer audit provided by the Stifterverband, an independent network for education, collaborative research and innovation (Stifterverband n.d.), can provide support in formulating objectives for the area of transfer. This is a development tool for universities that want to further develop their cooperation strategies with external partners from business, politics, culture, and the public sector and strengthen transfer in their overall university development.

7 Notes and recommendations

Understanding language and target groups

Language determines resonance. Different professional cultures have different terms, values, and communication styles. Good scouts translate between science, society, and business—clearly, respectfully, and compatibly.

Checklist:

- ☐ Is the speech adapted depending on the faculty or discipline?
- ☐ Are transfer ideas communicated in a way that is understandable to different target groups?

Building trust and relationships

Successful transfer scouting begins with genuine contacts. Presence in faculties, open listening, and personal conversations are initially more important than formal processes. Trust is the basis for cooperation.

Checklist:

- ☐ Are there regular, face-to-face meetings with researchers and faculty leaders?
- ☐ Is the role of the transfer scout clearly communicated and recognizable as supportive and collaborative?

Encouraging orientation and networking

Transfer scouting thrives on overview and cooperation. A good knowledge of existing players, projects and interfaces facilitates orientation and reveals synergies. Good scouts network in a targeted manner and document activities visibly. They share experiences and best practices and support each other.

Checklist:

- ☐ Is there a current overview of transfer activities and contact persons?
- ☐ Is there regular communication with central departments (e.g., research funding, public relations)?
- ☐ Is there regular communication between the scouts, leading to the best possible results for everyone involved?

Focus and make visible

Small, well-supported projects have a greater impact than lots of vague ideas. Successful scouts prioritize, launch pilot projects, and highlight successes—this motivates others and creates new opportunities.

Checklist:

- ☐ Are there clearly defined priorities or pilot projects for transfer scouting?
- ☐ Are successful activities documented and communicated?

Fig. 4: Key findings and recommendations for action.

8 Outlook und Call to Action

This white paper invites discussion of approaches to transfer scouting and an exchange of views on challenges and experiences. Relevant aspects include sharpening the job profile of transfer scouting and developing recommendations for action for professional structures. This also includes the design of a common set of indicators to measure the impact of corresponding activities. Gateway ESC is happy to share its findings from five years of transfer scouting at the University of Cologne, present *lessons learned*, provide impetus through lectures, and create networks for interested institutions and stakeholders.

Have you gained your own experience in preparing or implementing scouting activities? We look forward to exchanging ideas with institutions that would like to share their own experiences with scouting activities or deal with the topic more intensively in the future. Please feel free to contact us.

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