



Knowledge exchange and collaboration in entrepreneurial activities at the University of Kassel

University of Kassel, Germany

Abstract

This case study updates the 2018 HEInnovate case study of the University of Kassel and examines the evolution of its entrepreneurship, innovation and knowledge transfer ecosystem. Since 2018, the university has further strengthened its organisational capacity through the continued development of UniKasselTransfer and a portfolio of complementary initiatives supporting entrepreneurship, sustainability-oriented innovation and regional collaboration. Particular attention is given to the SDG+ Lab as an example of challenge-driven knowledge transfer and co-creation with regional stakeholders, complemented by infrastructures and strategic partnerships, including Science Park Kassel, the Gründungsetage, Hessen Ideen and UAI+. The case demonstrates how the university has developed an integrated institutional approach to knowledge transfer that strengthens organisational capacity and regional innovation, while offering transferable lessons on impact measurement, long-term funding, scalability and transferability.



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Institutional Profile

[The University of Kassel](#) is a public university located in Kassel, Germany (see Table 1). Since its foundation, it has developed a profile characterised by **interdisciplinarity**, **practice-oriented research**, and **strong regional engagement**. The university's strategic development increasingly emphasises **knowledge exchange**, **entrepreneurship**, and **innovation** as part of its **third mission**.

TABLE 1. UNIVERSITY OF KASSEL – INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE AND KEY INDICATORS (2025/26)

Indicator	Latest Available Information
Country / Region	Germany, Federal State of Hesse
City	Kassel
Year of establishment	1971
Total students	21,131 students (Winter Semester 2025/26)
International students	3,357 international students (16% of total enrolment)
International degree-seeking students	2,588 (12% of total enrolment)
Faculties / academic structure	10 faculties + Kunsthochschule Kassel
Central transfer and innovation unit	UniKasselTransfer (UKT) (founded 2004)
Main innovation infrastructure	Science Park Kassel (opened 2015)
Internationalisation (partnerships)	Approx. 350 Erasmus+ partner universities
Key current innovation initiative	SDG+ Lab (2023–2027)
Strategic cooperation network	Member of UAl1+ University Alliance

Source: [Facts & Figures, University of Kassel](#)

Rationale for Strengthening Transfer Structures

The University of Kassel has positioned entrepreneurship and knowledge exchange as an integral part of its institutional mission. The **rationale** for strengthening transfer structures is rooted in the **need to connect research and teaching outcomes more systematically with societal and economic impact**. This includes supporting start-ups and spin-offs, strengthening collaboration with industry and civil society, and promoting sustainable regional development.

Developments over time

Compared to the earlier HEInnovate case study (2018), the university has increasingly consolidated entrepreneurship-related activities under [UniKasselTransfer \(UKT\)](#). The former Research and Teaching Centre for Entrepreneurial Thinking and Acting (Fludh) is no longer

active. UKT now represents the university's **primary institutional hub** for entrepreneurship, innovation and transfer.

A key change since 2018 is the **expansion of innovation activities beyond classic start-up promotion towards challenge-driven and sustainability-oriented innovation formats**. This development is particularly visible through the [SDG+ Lab](#), established in 2023. In addition, the [Science Park Kassel](#) and its renovated start-up spaces ([Gründungsetage](#)) have strengthened the physical infrastructure supporting entrepreneurial activity.

Description of Initiatives

Rather than relying on a single flagship initiative, the University of Kassel has developed an **interconnected portfolio of structures, programmes and partnerships** that collectively strengthen entrepreneurship, knowledge transfer, and societal engagement. These initiatives operate at institutional, regional, and international levels, addressing different but complementary dimensions of innovation capacity. Together, they form an integrated **innovation ecosystem** that supports researchers, students, businesses, public organisations and civil society throughout the innovation process.

UniKasselTransfer as the institutional transfer hub

UniKasselTransfer (UKT) serves as the University of Kassel's central structure for knowledge transfer, entrepreneurship and innovation. It brings together activities related to **societal engagement and regional development**, and **links research, teaching and external partnerships** within a coherent institutional framework. In doing so, UKT supports the University's role as an active contributor to regional and national innovation processes.

Within this overarching framework, several specialised initiatives and infrastructures operationalise UKT's transfer mission and extend its thematic and functional reach.

SDG+ Lab as a flagship transfer programme

Strategic role within UniKasselTransfer

Within this institutional framework, the [SDG+ Lab](#) provides a challenge-driven approach to sustainability-oriented innovation and collaboration with external stakeholders. By linking academic research with real-world experimentation, the Lab creates spaces for interdisciplinary collaboration, co-creation with external stakeholders, and the development of solutions aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. In this way, it functions as a thematic flagship that strengthens UKT's societal impact and expands transfer activities beyond traditional commercialisation pathways.

Funding and institutional framework

The SDG+ Lab is financed from January 2023 to December 2027 through the "Innovative Hochschule" initiative funded by the federal government and the federal states, aimed at

strengthening the role of universities in their regional innovation systems and strategically developing transfer profiles. Through the SDG+ Lab, UniKasselTransfer has the personnel and operating resources to **develop and test innovative transfer methodologies and formats** aligned with the University of Kassel's focus on "Sustainable Transformations", which would not be possible without the project funding. The funding covers operating costs as well as project staff at UniKasselTransfer and in the departments of the project's academic chairs, who are professors involved in the project and responsible for running living labs as part of the SDG+ Lab.

Thematic structure

The SDG+ Lab project is organised in four thematic years ("Themenjahre"), each of which encompasses several SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations), beginning in October 2023, 2024, 2025, and 2026 respectively and spanning two semesters:

- Transformations in energy and environment (Umwelt und Energie)
- Transformations in city and region (Stadt und Land)
- Transformations in work and economy (Arbeit und Wirtschaften)
- Transformations in culture and community (Kultur und Zusammenleben)

Transfer formats and methods

During the thematic years, different transfer methods and formats run parallel to each other:

- living labs ("SDG+ Experimentale" – a programme led by one or more professors of the University of Kassel as Academic Chairs),
- transdisciplinary stakeholder dialogues ("SDG+ Dialog" – a programme led by UniKasselTransfer),
- open social innovation challenges ("SDG+ Challenge" – a programme led by UniKasselTransfer),
- an accelerator programme ("SDG+ Transfer Akzelerator" led by UniKasselTransfer) as well as
- innovative event formats and exhibitions aimed at creating public and scientifically informed dialogue regarding sustainability transformations (SDG+ Observatorium" – a programme led by UniKasselTransfer).

Co-creation spaces and experimental settings

As part of the SDG+ project, the University of Kassel opened an event, exhibition and co-creation space in the city centre of Kassel, the "[UNI:Lokal](#)". Regarding transfer methodology, the SDG+ Lab develops and tests collaborative and co-creation methods, identifying relevant regional sustainability challenges through interaction with non-academic stakeholders and developing prototypical solutions jointly with regional partners.

In the context of the SDG+ Lab living lab programme “[Experimentale](#)”, the University opened “Zukunftsläden (Future shops)”, temporary community spaces in four neighbourhoods, each operating for two months. In 2024, they reached over **6,000 participants** and helped initiate up to **25 locally organised groups** that continue working on neighbourhood sustainability issues (clothing swap events, citizen solar energy consulting initiatives, a monthly market with regional and organic produce, etc.).

In the [SDG+ Challenge](#), in each thematic year, **8–9 cross-sectoral teams** work on developing concrete projects addressing sustainability challenges, working on topics such as **revitalising the town centre, developing concepts for specific community centres, improving cycle-lane connectivity** in the rural parts of the region, and **sustainable design ideas**. Students can participate in the challenge teams and gain credit points through a “key competences” seminar, in which **84 students** have participated as of summer term 2026 (with 1,5 project years still to come).

Regional engagement and communities of practice

Ultimately, one of the central aims of the project is to build a “**community of practice**”.

Through the structure of the four thematic years, a broad range of regional stakeholders and initiatives are addressed with sustainability questions that are relevant to them as starting points and are invited to jointly work on topics that concern them.

In the Themenjahr “Transformations in work and economy”, the programmes of the SDG+ Lab, for example, addressed civil society initiatives from the area of the sharing economy (Materialverteilung Kassel e.V., Baustoffbörse, allerlei e.V., foodsharing Kassel e.V., Textilwerkstatt des Diakonischen Werks Kassel) as well as the municipal company Städtische Werke to discuss and test ways to strengthen the circular economy in Kassel, while in other programmes connecting university researchers, regional management, and regional producers to work on the potential of the bioeconomy for regional economic development.

Similarly, in the other thematic years, the SDG+ programmes address different levels and sectors of regional stakeholders and organisations, starting from **sustainability challenges for the region**. In this way, they successively build and connect “communities of practice”, with the SDG+ Lab programmes serving as a connecting framework and positioning UniKasselTransfer and the University of Kassel as relevant intermediaries and agenda-setters in the regional ecosystem. After two thematic years and close to the end of the third year, the “community of practice” is composed of roughly **900 members**, as measured by persons receiving the internal project newsletter. Prospectively, this will benefit the University of Kassel and its sustainability transformation focus while highlighting UniKasselTransfer’s methodological and relationship-management strengths.

“Gründungsetage” as entrepreneurial infrastructure within UKT

Complementing these activities, the “[Gründungsetage](#)” (Start-up floor) provides the physical and organisational infrastructure **supporting entrepreneurship and start-up development** as part of the UniKasselTransfer ecosystem. It offers workspace, advisory services, mentoring, and networking opportunities for founders emerging from the university context. Through these functions, the “Gründungsetage” operationalises UKT’s entrepreneurship support mission and creates a tangible interface between academic innovation and venture creation.

Hessen Ideen

Through [Hessen Ideen](#), the University of Kassel connects its start-up support activities with the wider Hessian entrepreneurship landscape. Launched in 2016 by the State of Hesse, Hessian universities and partner companies, under the patronage of the Hessian Ministry of Science and Research, Arts and Culture, the initiative is coordinated by the University of Kassel and TU Darmstadt through their respective transfer and start-up agencies, UniKasselTransfer and [HIGHEST](#).

Hessen Ideen aims to identify and support entrepreneurial talent and innovative ideas emerging from universities through the following programmes:

- Hessen Ideen Scholarship
- Hessen Ideen Competition
- Hessen Ideen University Network

Hessen Ideen Scholarship

The [Hessen Ideen Scholarship](#) is a six-month funding programme designed for university members and recent graduates who are in the early stages of developing an innovative, knowledge-based business idea.

Participating teams receive financial support of up to €2,500 per month, as well as access to an accelerator programme consisting of workshops, coaching sessions, and mentoring opportunities. The programme supports teams in transforming an initial entrepreneurial concept into a validated business model.

Eligibility Criteria

At least one team member must be either a current member or an alumnus/alumna of a state or state-recognised non-profit private university in Hesse. Applicants must hold a first university degree (bachelor's degree) obtained no more than five years prior to the application.

Hessen Ideen Competition

Each year, the [Hessen Ideen Competition](#) recognises the most promising entrepreneurial ideas developed at Hessian universities. Universities are invited to nominate up to three outstanding projects.

Prize Money

- 1st place: €10,000
- 2nd place: €7,000
- 3rd place: €4,000

In addition, an audience award is presented during the award ceremony.

Beyond the financial prizes, participants benefit from several additional advantages:

- professional feedback on their business idea
- increased visibility and public recognition
- access to networking events and opportunities to expand professional networks

The reviewers come from a broad innovation ecosystem, including banking and venture finance, startups, technology transfer organisations, academia, economic development agencies, industry associations, and social entrepreneurship networks. This diversity ensures both commercial and innovation-focused perspectives in the evaluation and feedback process. A special role is played by alumni-founded companies of the University of Kassel. Their feedback is particularly valuable, as they understand the unique opportunities and challenges of building a university spin-off from first-hand experience.

Eligibility Criteria

Students, academic staff, professors, and alumni who graduated within the past five years are eligible to participate. Applications may be submitted individually or as a team. Only one proposal per participant or team is permitted.

At the time of application (deadline: 2 April 2026), neither the incorporation of a corporation nor the commencement of business operations may have taken place.

“Commencement of business operations” refers to generating revenue and operating on the market with the intention of making a profit. Participants may, however, have founded a company during the calendar years 2024 or 2025 (excluding corporations) and/or be recipients of an [EXIST start-up grant](#).

Teams that have already participated in and completed a business plan competition are excluded from participation.

Hessen Ideen University Network

Within the [Hessen Ideen University Network](#), start-up support services at Hessian universities collaborate closely to strengthen entrepreneurial support structures across the state of Hesse. The network aims to establish Hessen Ideen as a central component of the Hessian start-up ecosystem.

Science Park Kassel GmbH

Building on these support structures, [Science Park Kassel](#) serves as the central innovation and start-up hub located on the North Campus of the University of Kassel. Established in 2015, the Science Park serves as an **interface between academia and industry**, supporting knowledge transfer, entrepreneurship, and innovation in the region of Northern Hesse.

The Science Park provides more than 6,000 square metres of office, workshop, and event space for university spin-offs, start-ups, and companies seeking close collaboration with the university environment. In addition to flexible **workspaces**, the centre offers **conference and networking facilities** that are regularly used by regional and national organisations.

A **key objective** of the Science Park is to **support founders from the initial idea phase through to market entry**. The centre offers start-up consulting, mentoring, networking opportunities, and access to regional and national innovation ecosystems. Several important university-related institutions are based at the Science Park, including UniKasselTransfer, the university's central transfer organisation, and the [UNIKIMS Business School](#).

The Science Park plays a significant role in strengthening entrepreneurship and innovation within the University of Kassel and the wider Kassel region. Around **40 start-ups** are currently located at the centre, benefiting from collaboration opportunities, professional infrastructure, and proximity to research expertise and technological resources.

The project is supported by the City of Kassel and the University of Kassel, both of which view the Science Park as an **important driver for regional economic, social, and technological development**.

UA11+ cooperation as a strategic transfer network

Finally, participation in [the German University Alliance \(UA\) 11+](#) places the university's transfer activities within a broader inter-university network. This network enables the **exchange of practices, joint learning**, and **coordinated transfer-related initiatives** across partner institutions. As such, UA11+ strengthens the strategic positioning of UKT beyond the regional level and contributes to the **continuous development of transfer structures through collaborative approaches**.

In June 2025, the UA11+ network released a mission statement on university-based knowledge transfer, co-authored by UniKasselTransfer. This statement sets out [8 principles](#)

for an adaptable, challenge-driven approach to transfer, positioning it as a core, mission-oriented task. The principles address:

- transfer across academic disciplines
- developing solutions to regional and societal challenges
- introducing new methods for research and teaching
- promoting innovation and preparing skilled workers for the future
- ensuring excellent research alongside strong transfer structures
- creating incentive mechanisms tailored to transfer ambitions, and
- establishing professional transfer personnel.

The mission statement highlights the importance of evolving transfer processes to meet diverse needs, drive innovation, and strengthen the university's role in addressing societal challenges.

Impact and Success Factors

The University of Kassel's integrated transfer ecosystem has strengthened its organisational capacity for entrepreneurship, knowledge transfer and regional engagement through **sustained investment in complementary structures, partnerships and innovation activities**. Anchored in UniKasselTransfer, the university has established a **stable organisational framework** that has evolved continuously since 2004, providing long-term strategic coordination for entrepreneurship, knowledge exchange and societal engagement.

This organisational foundation is reinforced by complementary initiatives operating at different levels of the innovation ecosystem. Science Park Kassel provides a strong infrastructural success factor by offering a **physical space** where start-ups, researchers, and external stakeholders can interact. At the same time, initiatives such as the SDG+ Lab have broadened the university's approach to **knowledge transfer** by embedding sustainability, co-creation and societal innovation within transfer activities. Through living labs and collaborative formats, the initiative has strengthened **engagement with civil society and regional stakeholders** while creating new opportunities for experimentation and regional transformation.

The university has also strengthened its capacity to monitor and continuously improve its transfer activities. The "[Transferbarometer](#)" – a survey tool developed jointly with the Stifterverband – provides more than **85** input, output and outcome indicators for evaluating knowledge transfer performance.

The main objectives of the strategy are the quantitative stabilisation of existing measures and the qualitative further development of individual measures. Regarding new measures,

the main objective is to rigorously test these elements. The SDG+ Lab, which bundles most of the measures described, carries out **four process cycles over four thematic years**, each of which is evaluated individually and, at the end, collectively in terms of resonance, functionality, and impact. The SDG+ Lab has strengthened the university's innovation profile by **developing formats intended to foster sustainability-oriented and societal innovation**. This initiative supports co-creation formats that increase engagement with civil society and create opportunities for regional transformation, as exemplified by one the core projects of the living lab in the thematic year "Transformationen in Stadt und Land", in which university members (professors, students) and neighbourhood actors (youth centre, primary school, city planning department, local council, ecological initiatives etc.) jointly developed a vacant area in a socially fragmented neighbourhood into an open air "Third Place" (a publication about the living labs in Themenjahr 2 is in process, to be published winter 2026).

Furthermore, the strategic measures outlined above are intended to test hypotheses regarding the further development of the concept of knowledge transfer. The university views the developmental step toward "gestaltungsorientierten (action-oriented)" transfer in the sense of a learning system as a challenging task, the success of which can be achieved and evaluated primarily within the process itself. In this context, existing measures are also continually re-examined and adapted to current needs in society and academia.

Through regular online and in-person exchanges among transfer professionals and university leaders, UA11+ has supported policy learning, alignment of transfer strategies and the development of the Mission Statement on University-based Knowledge Transfer, published as the [UA11+ Transferleitbild](#) in June 2025.

Challenges, Mitigation, and Lessons Learned

Through its initiatives as the SDG+ Lab, UniKasselTransfer currently implements highly dynamic transfer activities, supported by a team of **10 SDG+ project staff** at UniKasselTransfer and additional scientific project staff for the SDG+ living labs in several university departments.

A key challenge, however, concerns the **long-term sustainability** of these activities. By the end of the current funding period in 2027, UniKasselTransfer is expected to have established an extensive portfolio of sustainability transfer initiatives and strong regional partnerships. Maintaining these achievements beyond the lifetime of the *Innovative Hochschule* programme will require the **successful acquisition of additional external funding**, at a time when public funding for higher education and innovation is becoming increasingly constrained, particularly in the federal state of Hesse.

The **continued reliance on competitive project funding** presents challenges for retaining highly qualified staff, preserving institutional knowledge and maintaining long-term relationships with partners inside and outside the University. While UniKasselTransfer seeks to embed successful approaches within existing institutional structures and to pursue further funding opportunities, its ability to sustain and scale innovative transfer activities ultimately depends on the wider funding and policy environment.

More broadly, this experience illustrates an important lesson for higher education institutions seeking to strengthen knowledge transfer. Building innovative transfer structures requires long-term organisational commitment but sustaining them often depends on funding mechanisms that operate on comparatively short project cycles. The University of Kassel's experience therefore highlights the importance of aligning institutional ambitions with funding models that support continuity, organisational learning and lasting stakeholder relationships.

Sustainability, Scalability and Transferability

In 2021, the University of Kassel participated for the first time in the Stifterverband's comprehensive *Transferbarometer* survey. The findings informed the development of the university's current transfer strategy and the continued expansion of UniKasselTransfer's activities.

Sustainability

The sustainability of the University of Kassel's transfer approach lies primarily in its **institutional anchoring**. UniKasselTransfer has evolved into a stable organisational framework that connects entrepreneurship, knowledge exchange, and societal engagement, while the Transferbarometer provides an evidence base for continuous reflection, evaluation and strategic adjustment. At the same time, the long-term continuity of more experimental formats depends on external project funding. Sustainability is therefore supported by strong structures and learning-oriented governance but remains vulnerable where dedicated resources are temporary.

Scalability

The scalability of the Kassel model lies primarily in its **underlying design logic** rather than in simple numerical growth. Reusable formats, thematic cycles, and structured cooperation with different stakeholder groups create a framework that can be extended across topics and institutional settings. This modularity increases the university's capacity to address new challenge areas without rebuilding transfer structures from scratch. However, scaling such approaches also requires sufficient staffing, coordination capacity, and continued strategic support.

Transferability

The Kassel model is transferable not because individual initiatives can be replicated directly, but because its underlying **governance principles** can be adapted to different institutional contexts. These include a central intermediary structure, a challenge-oriented understanding of transfer, and the systematic connection of academic, civic, and regional actors. This offers a relevant example for other universities seeking to strengthen transfer beyond commercialisation alone. Transferability is therefore strongest at the level of governance logic and methodological approach, while concrete implementation would need to reflect local institutional and regional conditions.

Together, these characteristics demonstrate that the University of Kassel's approach is sustainable through institutional embedding, scalable through its modular design, and transferable through its governance model rather than through the replication of individual initiatives.

Conclusion and Future Outlook

Since 2018, the University of Kassel has made significant progress in strengthening its entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystem through the coordinated development of complementary transfer structures, partnerships and support mechanisms. Rather than relying on a single flagship initiative, the university has established an integrated approach that combines entrepreneurship support, knowledge exchange, sustainability-oriented innovation and regional engagement within a coherent institutional framework.

This integrated approach has strengthened the University's organisational capacity for knowledge transfer while fostering closer collaboration with businesses, public authorities and civil society. At the same time, initiatives such as the SDG+ Lab illustrate how knowledge transfer can contribute not only to innovation and entrepreneurship but also to broader societal transformation and sustainability objectives.

Looking ahead, the University's priorities include **further strengthening impact measurement, increasing the visibility of entrepreneurship and transfer outcomes, and securing the long-term sustainability of successful initiatives** beyond the current funding period. Continued collaboration through networks such as UAI1+ will provide further opportunities for institutional learning, strategic cooperation and the continued evolution of the University's transfer model.

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