AGICA Lessons Learned Paper 2 (November 2025)

Agents of Knowledge Transfer between Professional Administrative Services, Research and HE Leadership – international conference proceedings from the German AGICA Project

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are 'expert organizations' that produce knowledge each and every day, with research from different disciplines clearly being a major source of such knowledge generation. We may think less immediately, however, about the various and considerable areas of expertise that are located in professional higher education (HE) administrative services. As HEIs respond to increasingly challenging needs (e.g. globalization; internationalization etc.), HE development can benefit from the expertise contained in *all* areas of the institution. However, this expertise may not always be easy to identify. If we consider the possible mutual benefits of internal knowledge transfer, how can a HEI's own research support administration and how might administrative expertise vice versa support academic research?

These questions guided the international conference **Agents of Knowledge Transfer between Professional Administrative Services, Research and HE Leadership**, which took place on November 29th 2024 at Ludwigsburg University of Education (organized by the Institute for Education Management). In addition to a range of Ludwigsburg's staff employees, numerous external experts took part, including some from other countries, including Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The conference was part of the BMFTR-research project AGICA **Agile Campus - University-internal Knowledge Transfer between Academia and Administration**, which was investigating whether and to what extent university administrations and researchers in Germany mutually exchange their expertise. The aim was to systematically analyse the practical potential and limits of this interrelationship. A key approach of AGICA was the integration of participatory methods. By bringing professional administrative staff, researchers and HEI leaders together, the aim was to closely dovetail scientific findings with practical experience. This co-operative approach combined interdisciplinary perspectives and developed sustainable, research-based solutions for administrative challenges. In this sense, the international conference was designed to be participatory. HEI leaders, professional administrative staff and researchers were all invited. Following three keynote speeches, one from each of the mentioned areas, interactive discussions were also encouraged in World Cafés. The key lessons regarding our conference proceedings and the AGICA project are outlined in the following.[1]

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[1] Terms referring to administrative and professional roles in higher education differ across national contexts and scholarly traditions. Because the keynote speakers and contributors in this conference represent several systems, this paper intentionally retains the variety of terms they use – such as professional administrative staff, professional services, non-academic staff. Rather than imposing one uniform definition, we reflect these contextual differences and acknowledge that the international discussion about evolving staff roles and hybrid professional identities is ongoing.

Project AGICA: University-internal Knowledge Transfer between Researchers and Administration

AGICA challenges the traditional service concept that defines university administrations as purely supportive entities. Instead, it pursues a reciprocal understanding of service, positioning research as a driving force for administrative innovation. From this perspective, administrators and researchers become equal partners in shaping institutional development. The central research questions are:

1. **To what extent does a recursive knowledge transfer between research and administration exist?**
2. **Which success factors and obstacles determine this exchange?**

In this context, **internal knowledge transfer** is understood as the exchange of and about knowledge between academia (research and teaching) and administration (professional administrative staff and leadership). It relies on collaborative cooperation in which researchers, professional administrative staff and HE leaders act as equal and active partners. By linking academic expertise with administrative practice, innovative solutions can emerge that enhance efficiency, support organisational modernisation, and strengthen the strategic orientation of HEIs. At the same time, such exchange enables the administration to better understand the needs of research and teaching, resulting in sustainable and future-oriented collaboration.

AGICA follows a **mixed-methods design** combining interdisciplinary literature and document analyses with qualitative, quantitative and participatory methods. In the initial phase, 26 exploratory interviews (each lasting around 60 minutes) were conducted with HE leaders, professional administrative staff and researchers at three universities. All quotations cited in this paper have been translated from German. The interviews were followed by a large-N online survey at the same institutions (N: 1.020) and six in-depth expert interviews with the leaders of the participating HEIs. The methodological steps are closely interlinked in the sense of triangulation, building upon one another and ensuring empirical robustness through mutual validation of findings.

The analysis of the **interviews** suggests that perceptions of internal knowledge transfer differ significantly between status groups and that both opportunities and challenges for closer collaboration exist.

First, **HE leaders** play a pivotal role in initiating and promoting the transfer of knowledge between research and administration. They act as facilitators by deliberately involving researchers in administrative projects and creating supportive structures for collaboration. Examples include the participation of academic staff in developing onboarding procedures or in AI-based projects aimed at improving administrative efficiency. Such initiatives are described by interviewees as particularly valuable, as they not only produce tangible results but also strengthen mutual understanding and long-term cooperation.

Second, **researchers** demonstrate a certain reservation that stems from reflecting on their own role. They consider knowledge transfer valuable in principle but participate actively only when their expertise is explicitly requested and their contribution clearly defined. This distinction from traditional advisory roles is important: researchers wish to remain autonomous and to engage only where scientific expertise is genuinely needed.

Third, **professional administrative staff** recognise the potential of internal knowledge transfer but perceive limited opportunities to initiate it themselves. While they value academic expertise, they question the

willingness of researchers to engage in administrative projects. From their perspective, collaboration offers a "win-win" situation – improving both scientific output and administrative performance – yet it depends on leadership support and available time resources. Professional administrative staff therefore emphasise the need for institutional backing that allows them sufficient scope to engage in such activities.

Overall, although internal knowledge transfer does occur to some extent, it remains informal, selective and person-dependent. University administrations often act as initiators, yet systematic structures and reciprocal engagement are still rare. This indicates substantial untapped potential for strengthening collaboration between research and administration and for developing universities as learning organisations. Figure 1 summarises the options for action available to different actor groups to promote successful internal knowledge transfer.
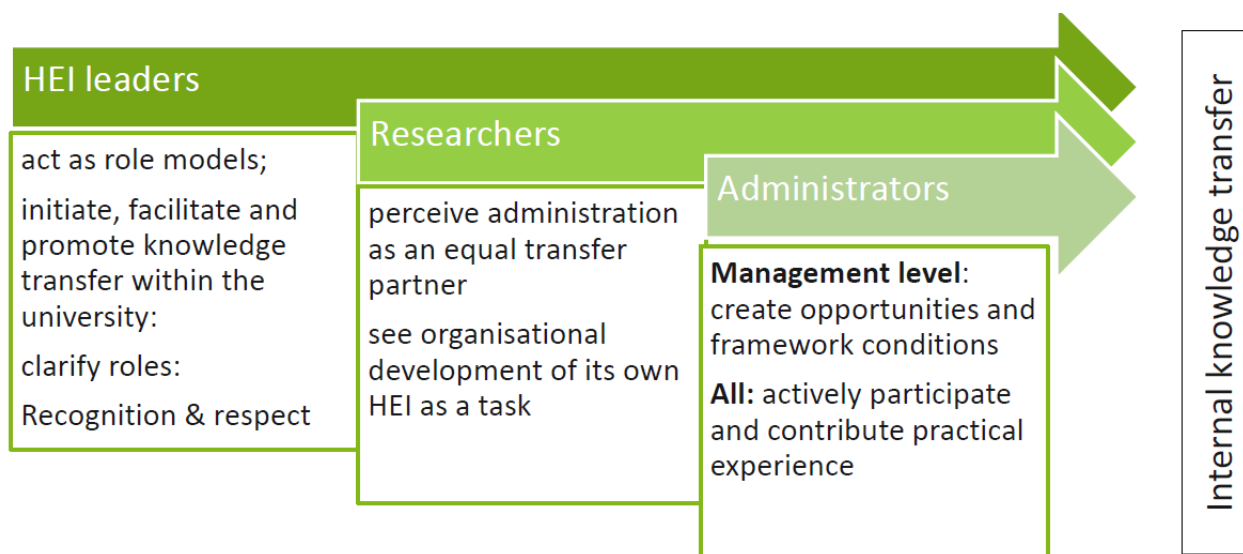

Figure 1: Options for action by various agents for successful internal knowledge transfer at universities.

Within the scope of the **online survey**, one question stands out, revealing differences between the status groups and highlighting the wishes and potential of internal knowledge exchange at HEIs. Figure 2 illustrates the different perceptions of administration and academia with regard to internal knowledge exchange at HEI.

32.7% of **professional administrative staff** state that their work has already benefited from suggestions, while this proportion is only 9.4% in research. This suggests that the transfer of knowledge to date has been perceived as helpful, especially by professional administrative staff, 20.1% of whom see themselves as a source of inspiration for other areas, while this figure is only 8.4% for research. Professional administrative staff therefore perceive their role in dialogue as more active than research. This suggests that the administration already contributes more to the further development of processes than previously assumed. 55.7% of professional administrative staff and 24.1% of researchers agree with this statement that their own work would benefit from a more intensive exchange. The significantly higher value in administration suggests that the need for closer networking and knowledge exchange is particularly high there. This could be due to existing communication gaps or a lack of structural framework conditions. With regard to the lack of time for dialogue on research issues, 51.9% of professional administrative staff and 40.3% of researchers agree. Both groups see time resources as a major inhibiting factor for more intensive dialogue. While the lack of time is

perceived even more strongly in administration, there is also a considerable need for better time management or resource planning in research.
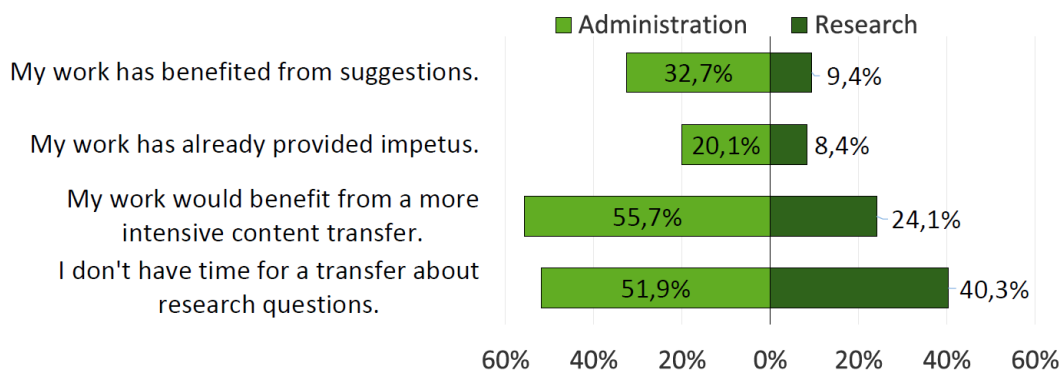

Figure 2: „To what extent do the following statements apply to you?"; Legend: "strongly agree" statements from "strongly agree", "somewhat agree" and "partly/partly agree"; Administration n: 443; Science n: 569.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Knowledge transfer within HEIs exists but remains largely informal and selective.
2. Clear role definitions are essential for researchers to engage meaningfully in internal exchange.
3. Perception of knowledge transfer differ between academic and professional administrative staff.
4. Structural and cultural barriers - time, communication gaps, unclear responsibilities - limit knowledge transfer.
5. HEI leaders are key drivers of sustainable knowledge exchange.
6. Institutionalising communication and collaboration structures can transform individual efforts into lasting organisational learning.

The Perspective of Research: University Governance and Collaborative Innovation (Glen A. Jones)

University governance has become an umbrella term for key higher-education policy issues such as accountability, quality assurance, funding, and internal management. While no single definition prevails, it broadly refers to how authority is delegated and exercised within institutions. This governance has grown increasingly complex, shaped by both external and internal pressures. Externally, shifting societal expectations and government oversight have expanded regulatory demands, leaving few areas of university activity unmonitored. Internally, institutions face the effects of knowledge expansion, specialisation, and organisational growth. Rising expectations from students and staff require more agile governance structures that balance efficiency with responsiveness. Contemporary priorities such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, mental health, equity, diversity, and inclusion all add further layers of responsibility. Globalisation compounds these challenges through international partnerships, regulatory variation, and the management of intellectual property and student mobility. Universities therefore need governance models that are both robust and flexible.

The growing complexity has intensified **reliance on non-academic (administrative?) professionals** with specialised expertise. These staff now underpin both the operational and strategic functions of universities. Many hold externally regulated roles, i.e. lawyers ensuring compliance, finance professionals managing

investments, health experts supporting community well-being, and estate managers overseeing extensive infrastructure. Alongside these more traditional fields, new roles have emerged in response to evolving institutional needs. Increasing professionalisation in areas such as human resources, academic development, and student services has expanded the authority and scope of these positions. Networks and communities of practice at institutional and national levels facilitate collaboration and shared learning. Professional bodies, codes of conduct, and training programmes further consolidate standards. Examples include governance professionals specialising in regulatory compliance, educational developers driving curriculum innovation, and research-ethics or integrity officers ensuring adherence to ethical frameworks.

Professional administrative expertise is now integral to modern university governance, supporting oversight, risk management, and informed decision-making. Effective governance depends on such expertise to maintain compliance, enable transparent delegation of authority, and strengthen confidence in institutional processes. The governance of research likewise relies on these administrative specialists who ensure ethical integrity, manage research administration and contracts, and safeguard intellectual property. Effective governance thus depends on **integrating academic and professional administrative expertise** in participatory advisory and decision-making bodies. Formal mechanisms such as committees and working groups, together with informal interaction, create opportunities for knowledge exchange and trust building. Identifying the individuals with the most relevant expertise - rather than focusing solely on positional hierarchy - enhances decision quality and institutional learning.

Ongoing **professional development** for both groups is a key enabler of collaboration. Joint training, workshops, and cross-functional projects nurture communities of practice that bridge disciplinary and administrative divides and foster mutual understanding. To support this collaboration, universities are investing in spaces for innovation and exchange, for instance **accelerators, hubs, and flexible project environments** that connect academic and administrative expertise with external partners from industry and government. These structures are often temporary and mission-driven, forming around specific challenges and dissolving once goals are achieved. Moreover, a gradual **shift toward project-oriented governance** can be observed. By organising around problems and objectives rather than rigid role definitions, institutions encourage cross-hierarchical collaboration and harness diverse expertise for shared outcomes.

In sum, the increasing complexity of university operations heightens the need for specialised knowledge and adaptive governance. Non-academic professionals play a central role in meeting these demands, complementing academic expertise and ensuring effective oversight. Sustainable governance depends on participatory approaches that value diverse perspectives, cultivate communities of practice, and maintain flexible structures for knowledge exchange. By focusing on collaboration and project-based problem-solving rather than hierarchy, universities can strengthen innovation, responsiveness, and institutional quality in a rapidly changing higher-education landscape.

LESSONS LEARNED

7. Non-academic professionals are key agents of knowledge transfer.
8. Collaboration between academic and non-academic staff is essential.
9. HEI leaders should support professionalisation to enhance knowledge transfer roles.
10. HEI leaders should adopt project-based governance to solve interdisciplinary challenges.

From the Perspective of Professional Staff: Facilitating Knowledge Exchange: from the State to the Coalface (Celia Whitchurch)

Knowledge exchange between professional services, academic staff, and university leadership has become of critical importance in enabling institutions to operate effectively in a rapidly changing environment. It can facilitate the exchange of ideas, practices, and expertise across organisational boundaries, fostering innovation and collaboration. Both formal frameworks and informal initiatives underpin these exchanges, bridging gaps between disciplines, professional roles, and levels of institutional seniority. Through well-coordinated knowledge exchange, universities seek to align internal goals with broader societal, economic, and policy objectives, contributing to progress at local, national, and international levels. Third Space professionals with mixed academic and professional roles and backgrounds have a key part to play in this.

In the UK, knowledge exchange has become critical to university operations and a key component of funding and evaluation frameworks. National mechanisms such as the **Research Excellence Framework** (REF) and the **Knowledge Exchange Framework** (KEF) emphasise the societal and economic impact of academic activity. Universities are required to demonstrate impact via, for example, partnership with industry, small businesses, public organisations and community groups. By drawing on KEF data, institutions are able to benchmark their performance, assess departmental effectiveness, and identify opportunities for strategic improvement, ensuring that knowledge exchange remains aligned with institutional priorities. Structured initiatives such as the **UKRI/EPSRC Sandpits Scheme** exemplify targeted approaches to fostering collaboration and innovation. These intensive, facilitated sessions bring researchers and stakeholders together to stimulate creative thinking, explore applications of existing research, and build sustainable partnerships. Outcomes can include new research ideas, funding proposals, and strengthened networks. Adaptations of the sandpit model at the institutional level show its flexibility whereby smaller, locally organised events can create inclusive environments for interdisciplinary dialogue and creative problem-solving, addressing context-specific challenges.

An ESRC/Research England-funded project on *The future higher education workforce in locally and globally engaged HEIs* conducted within the Centre for Global Higher Education between 2016 and 2020, provided examples of Mode 3 knowledge development (Whitchurch, et al 2023). It involved 49 academic and professional staff from eight universities, including research managers, learning developers, and a librarian. By engaging diverse participants, the project illustrated how collaborative initiatives can address both local and systemic challenges in higher education. For example, within universities, **research** and **knowledge-exchange managers** act as crucial intermediaries. Increasingly equipped with doctoral qualifications or extensive sectoral experience, they connect researchers with funding bodies, co-ordinate grant-writing activities, and strengthen collaborations. They assist academics in aligning proposals with funder priorities, monitor outcomes, and maintain institutional data on grant performance. Through these roles, they bridge academic work and external funding systems, enhance competitiveness, and embed organisational learning about successful practices.

Physical spaces that co-locate academic and professional expertise also play a vital role. Education and learning centres, for example, integrate functions such as academic writing, technology-enhanced learning, and quality assurance. These hubs foster teamwork and mutual understanding, allowing academic and professional staff to address shared challenges such as widening participation or improving learning analytics through collaborative problem-solving. Co-location promotes social capital: when academics, IT staff, librarians, and careers advisors work side by side, they are more likely to develop empathy for each other's roles and a shared language for collaboration. Teaching development programmes further reinforce this process by creating structured opportunities for cross-functional learning.

The concept of **Mode 3 knowledge production** (Carayannis & Campbell 2012/2016) captures the integration of diverse knowledge types through stakeholder participation and feedback. Unlike Mode 1 (disciplinary) or Mode 2 (applied) knowledge, Mode 3 emphasises situated, context-sensitive understanding (Flyvbjerg et al. 2012). It therefore goes beyond scientific 'truth' and technical know-how, and is sensitive to application in specific settings, emphasising situated knowledge that leads to local understandings for specific contexts. Related to this is the idea of collaborative capital (Veles 2022), which highlights how partnerships and participatory practices drive innovation.

Effective knowledge exchange relies on a combination of bottom-up initiatives and top-down support. Grassroots efforts by motivated individuals can create dynamic networks and project-oriented collaborations that cut across hierarchies. Ideally, institutional leaders provide the frameworks and resources to sustain them. Inclusive human resource policies, including recognition of KE activity for promotion, progression and career development purposes encourage participation and interdisciplinarity. Examples of "third-space" environments where academic, professional, and student stakeholders collaborate on initiatives such as gamified learning or employability projects demonstrate the value of co-creation in fostering innovation and shared ownership of institutional change.

LESSONS LEARNED:

11. Successful knowledge transfer requires diverse mechanisms.
12. Professional staff are likely to play a central role in successful knowledge transfer.
13. appropriately designed physical and organisational spaces are likely to a enhance knowledge transfer.
14. Practical wisdom represented by Mode 3 knowledge and the development of collaborative capital can be drivers of knowledge transfer.

The Perspective of HEI Leaders: Knowledge Exchange in German Higher Education – Experiences from Leadership (Heide Klug)

Drawing on the experience of the Chancellor of the Technical University of Aschaffenburg, this contribution presents knowledge transfer as a key element of HEI leadership, spanning sustainability strategy, financial risk management, and crisis response. Knowledge transfer in practice requires understanding its mechanisms, identifying key stakeholders, and assessing its impact. It operates through structured processes that integrate expertise across domains, fostering collaboration between academic, administrative, and professional actors. This approach ensures that knowledge exchange produces meaningful outcomes, drives innovation, and enhances institutional effectiveness. Three examples of collaboration between administration and academia illustrate how knowledge transfer supports institutional success and resilience.

Figure 3: The HOW, WHO, an WHAT of knowledge transfer. Source: Heide Klug

The first concerns the **development of a sustainability strategy**, which demonstrates the need for clarity in content, methodology, and participation. Effective knowledge transfer depends on balancing professional input and delegation with broad acceptance. Coordinated efforts among researchers, leadership, and administrative staff ensure that the strategy is both feasible and collectively supported. This participatory approach improves quality and fosters stakeholder ownership—key to implementing sustainable practices across the university.
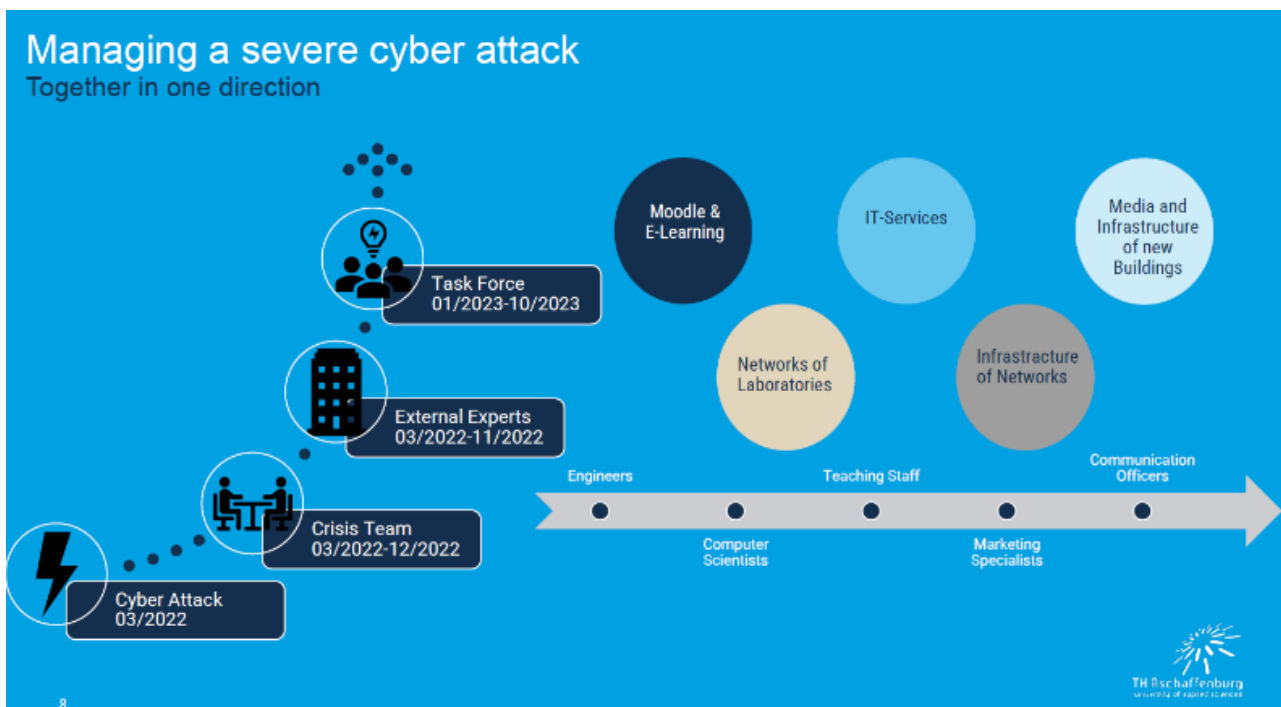

Figure 4: Managing a severe cyber-attack as example of successful internal knowledge transfer at the Technical University of Aschaffenburg. Source: Heide Klug.

A second example, **managing third-party funding**, highlights how addressing financial and legal complexities requires close collaboration between researchers and administrative professionals. Compliance with taxation, trade regulations, and institutional policies mitigates risk and ensures accountability. Clear communication is essential, particularly when administrative guidance intersects with academic priorities. Achieving this balance enables the institution to secure and manage external funding effectively, strengthening its research and innovation capacity.

A third example, **the university's response to a severe cyberattack in March 2022**, illustrates the critical role of knowledge transfer in crisis management. The incident prompted the creation of a crisis team, the involvement of external experts, and a long-term recovery task force. Expertise was shared across engineering, computer science, IT services, teaching, and marketing, ensuring that technical, organisational, and communication challenges were addressed holistically. Collaboration across hierarchical and functional boundaries enabled the university to develop robust solutions and reinforced its resilience against future threats.

Together, these examples show how knowledge transfer enables universities to navigate complexity, foster innovation, and strengthen institutional resilience. By integrating academic and administrative expertise, HEIs can address diverse priorities—from sustainability and finance to crisis response—in a cohesive and impactful manner.

LESSONS LEARNED:

15. Knowledge transfer works in all directions.
16. Knowledge transfer uses expertise at its core.
17. Knowledge transfer mobilizes energy of staff.
18. Knowledge transfer motivates a focus on individual strengths.
19. Knowledge transfer helps to change perspectives.

Uniting Perspectives: Lessons Learned from the AGICA-World-Journey

Following the three keynote speeches, three "World-Journey Workshops" were organised as an interactive format to foster exchange between researchers, administrative staff, and HEI leaders. Each of the three thematic stations represented a national context and was moderated by one of the keynote speakers. Participants rotated between tables, collaboratively exploring practical strategies for strengthening internal knowledge transfer within HEIs. This format provided a dynamic platform for developing actionable ideas to enhance collaboration and knowledge transfer across institutional and national boundaries. The main results from the three stations are summarised below.

Governance to promote cooperation
This table focused on how university governance can bridge gaps between academic and administrative staff. Key questions included: How can governance foster collaboration across professional boundaries? What changes might make cooperation more mutually beneficial? Participants proposed job rotations and internships to strengthen mutual understanding, as well as incentive schemes and transparent communication strategies. Managers should model cooperative values, seek feedback before decisions, and recognise successful projects. Other suggestions included creating opportunities for informal interaction,

mixed workspaces, and joint initiatives. Establishing and promoting? a "learning from one's mistakes" culture and ensuring clarity of responsibilities and timeframes were also emphasised.

Creating time for knowledge exchange

Discussions centred on how to create time and space for meaningful exchange between research and administration. Participants agreed that knowledge exchange should be formally recognised as part of working time and actively scheduled. Suggested formats included "brown bag lunches," campus walks, and digital platforms such as Padlet or Confluence. Informal encounters such as lunch roulettes, breakfast meetings, or after-work events were seen as highly effective. Continuous learning was encouraged through short reflective practices such as "What have I learned from my colleagues this week?" lists. Reducing email overload and forming mixed teams were further strategies to strengthen dialogue.

Building bridges between research and administration

This table explored how to foster genuine dialogue and collaboration across functions. Participants proposed co-design approaches, joint training, and interdisciplinary project teams. Transparent decision-making and openness to learning from mistakes were considered key cultural prerequisites. Job rotations, mixed project teams, structured onboarding for new employees, and common communication tools were suggested to deepen collaboration. Concise, consistent messaging and accessible feedback channels were identified as success factors. Project-related workshops and shared events were also seen as valuable opportunities for dialogue.

Figure 7: Word cloud of mentions (at least 2 times) at the three AGICA World-Journey-Tables.

The World-Journey discussions mirrored the core findings of the AGICA project: participants emphasised the importance of an open and collaborative culture based on trust and mutual respect. Practical strategies such as job rotations, interdisciplinary teams, and structured dialogue formats emerged as key enablers of cooperation. Transparent communication and accessible leadership were recurrent themes, alongside social

and informal interactions that strengthen relationships and knowledge sharing. The integration of digital tools was viewed as an important means of supporting continuous learning and smoother communication. Three central themes were predominant in all groups:

1. **Open and collaborative culture:** A culture of mutual trust, supported by job rotation, mixed teams, social events and open communication, was emphasised as a prerequisite for successful collaboration.
2. **Transparent communication and joint decision-making processes:** Clear communication structures, feedback opportunities and open doors for managers were considered essential.
3. **Promoting learning and innovation through dialogue formats:** Continuous learning processes through thematic meetings, joint projects, asynchronous digital platforms and regular dialogue formats were identified as the basis for successful organisational development.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE AGICA WORLD-JOURNEY

20. All agents should be allowed to include knowledge exchange as part of regular working hours.
21. All agents should promote a culture where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities.
22. Interdisciplinary teams are useful for successful knowledge transfer.
23. HEI leaders should ensure transparency in decision-making processes.
24. HEI leaders should organise social events to foster informal knowledge exchange.
25. Digital tools can support a thriving internal knowledge transfer culture.

Conclusion

Knowledge transfer is a pivotal element of modern higher education institutions, serving as a catalyst for innovation, sustainability, and collaboration. The AGICA project – together with contributions from Glen Jones, Celia Whitchurch, and Heide Klug, and the discussions during the World-Café sessions – highlights the multifaceted nature of this process and its potential to address institutional challenges and strengthen collaboration across all levels of HEIs. Bringing these perspectives together, a unified framework for internal knowledge transfer in higher education emerges, guided by the following principles:

1. **Leadership-driven initiatives**: The style and engagement of HEI leaders are crucial for creating structures and values that foster collaboration and interdisciplinary exchange.

2. **Institutionalisation of knowledge exchange**: Knowledge transfer should be embedded in institutional policies and supported by dedicated resources to ensure continuity and impact.

3. **Integration of academic and professional expertise**: Recognising and combining both forms of expertise increases adaptability and institutional learning.

4. **Flexible and inclusive mechanisms**: A mix of formal frameworks and informal initiatives—such as sandpits or boundary objects—supports creativity and responsiveness to local contexts.

5. **Cultural transformation**: Building a culture of trust, openness, and continuous learning helps to overcome silos and promote shared understanding.

6. **Focus on practical outcomes**: Project-based approaches aligned with institutional and societal priorities ensure relevance and measurable results.

The collective insights from the AGICA International Conference **Agents of Knowledge Transfer between Professional Administrative Services, Research and HE Leadership** underline the transformative potential

of internal knowledge exchange. By integrating diverse expertise, fostering collaborative cultures, and embedding these practices institutionally, universities can respond to contemporary challenges with agility and resilience. Sustained leadership commitment and a culture of learning form the foundation for long-term innovation and organisational development.

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