

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



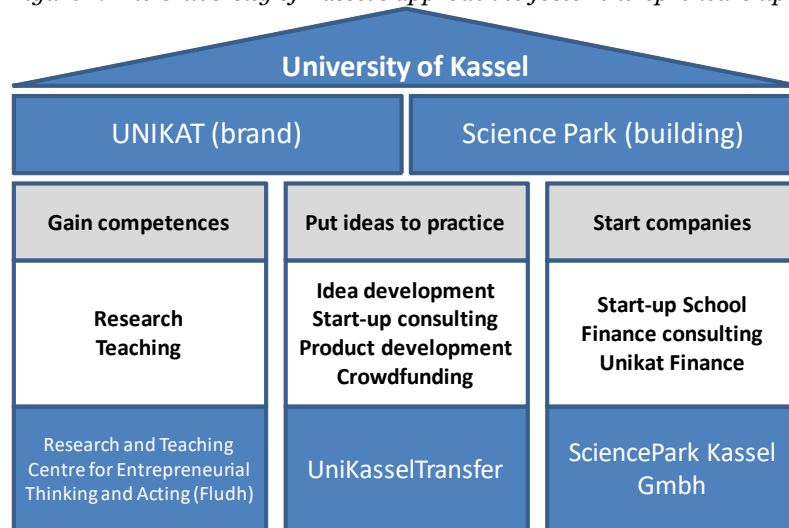
The University of Kassel is a public higher education institution located in the city of Kassel in the state of Hesse in the centre of Germany. It was founded in 1971 with the ambition to drive innovative concepts for practice-oriented teaching and learning as well as interdisciplinary work. As of the winter semester 2016/17, the University has 25,000 students. With ten departments plus the School of Fine Arts Kassel, the University of Kassel offers an extraordinarily broad spectrum of study opportunities.

Since 2013, the University of Kassel has the status of a “Founders’ University” (German: Gründerhochschule), an award from the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy. The award promotes universities with a pronounced culture of fostering new ventures. The University bundles all related activities under the label “UNIKAT enterprising more” (UNIKAT mehr unternehmen). UNIKAT includes four fields: (1) “Gaining competences”, including research and education; (2) “Realising ideas”, including an idea competition, start-up consulting and crowdfunding; (3) “Starting enterprises”, including access to finance, a “Startup School” and the Science Park Kassel; (4) “Idea and start-up University”, including the promotion of an “idea culture” and a broad portfolio of support offers.

UNIKAT is strongly intertwined with knowledge and technology transfer from the University to business, governments and society. Transfer activities are bundled in the University’s knowledge transfer section **UniKasselTransfer**. Furthermore, the University runs a **Research and Teaching Centre** for Entrepreneurial Thinking and Acting (Forschungs- und Lehrzentrum für Unternehmerisches Denken und Handeln, Fludh) – in the following also shortened to “the Centre” – that addresses the University’s students and researchers. The Centre’s name is its programme: It is in charge of integrating entrepreneurial thinking and acting in teaching, research and knowledge transfer at the whole university.

Figure 1 shows the University of Kassel’s approach to fostering entrepreneurship.

Figure 1: The University of Kassel’s approach to foster entrepreneurship



Source: University of Kassel (<http://www.uni-kassel.de/ukt/unikat/gruenderhochschule.html>), own translations

Knowledge exchange and collaboration are vital parts of the University of Kassel’s entrepreneurial concept and are represented in all entrepreneurial activities. External people asked to support an initiative of the University are normally very ready to engage. This spirit of mutual support may be due to the city’s location far away from the next larger cities and the University’s dominant role as a supplier of talents for the region.

## 1. How the University of Kassel commits itself to collaboration and knowledge exchange

Knowledge exchange and collaboration has a high priority at the University of Kassel in general and in its entrepreneurial activities in particular. This is specified in the University's strategy concept for "entrepreneurial thinking and acting in teaching, research and transfer". This concept has a "stakeholder-oriented approach" that also involves an "Entrepreneurs Council" (Unternehmer Rat) that provides insights from business. Specifically, when students or graduates start a new company, every such business venture from the University involves co-operation – with other, more experienced start-ups in the University's Science Park or with established companies in the region. The University's entrepreneurial strategy concept is aimed at the entire University. Hence, the Research and Teaching Centre for Entrepreneurial Thinking and Acting advertises its events to all departments, and it arranges contacts for co-operation among departments and profit- or non-profit organisations. The University's transfer concept provides guidance on how to develop external relationships, above all in a section about "requirements, structures and formats for dialogical co-operation". Since the departments are free to arrange external contacts on their own, there may be further entrepreneurship-related activities that are not necessarily known to the Research and Teaching Centre for Entrepreneurial Thinking and Acting and UniKasselTransfer. The University of Kassel's commitment to collaboration and knowledge exchange in the field of entrepreneurship may be described best along the three pillars of education, research and knowledge transfer.

With regard to **education**, in the summer semester 2016 and the winter semester 2016/17, the University had altogether 56 curricular offers in entrepreneurship education. 42 degree courses from eleven departments have recognised curricular offers in entrepreneurship. A certain share of the teachers are contract lecturers from practice. The Research and Teaching Centre for Entrepreneurial Thinking and Acting, under the label UNIKAT Education, offers a broad variety of events in entrepreneurship education. They strengthen entrepreneurial competences in practice-oriented seminars and projects, which very often involve external experts. Subjects include, for example, innovation management case studies, communication skills and applied project management. Depending on their curricula, students can receive credits for their study when attending these offers. For example, the course about "Entrepreneurship" is an elective option for business master students.

As regards **research**, the Research and Teaching Centre for Entrepreneurial Thinking and Acting promotes the interdisciplinary co-operation of the university's researchers in order to establish a university-wide research profile in entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education. The Centre also promotes co-operation with external research partners. As regards research about entrepreneurship, the Centre maintains a national and international network of researchers, mainly through publications, participation in conferences, third-party funded projects, running own events as well as an intensive dialogue with the science community. Knowledge exchange in this network contributes to developing the University's own research foci. The University uses findings from such research to further professionalise entrepreneurship education at the University. Moreover, the University has strong links with research-intensive companies from the region in terms of joint research projects and contract research as well as internships for students. While such co-operation rarely leads to new businesses, it confronts University researchers – including PhD students – with the business sphere and may open up minds for innovative thinking and acting.

Knowledge exchange and collaboration with the outside world are, in general, the nature of universities' **knowledge transfer** activities. The University of Kassel considers such transfer not as an additional task but as a core function, integrated with teaching and research. Its transfer office, UniKasselTransfer, has in-house experienced specialists in product development, start-up advice and start-up financing. UniKasselTransfer has a broad array of tasks: start-up consulting, further education, research evaluation, service learning, patent management, career service, alumni service, and a dual studies offer for enterprises. In the dual study, students from the University work in parallel at companies in the region. The Research and Teaching Centre for Entrepreneurial Thinking and Acting plays a role in knowledge transfer, too: It offers creative workshops for developing research findings further to marketable services.

These education, research and transfer activities related to external co-operation will be specified in the following.

## 2. Active involvement of external stakeholders

The University of Kassel involves a wide range of external stakeholders in its entrepreneurial work. There are certain strategic partners and specific bodies that contribute to sharpening the University's entrepreneurial profile.

The University's **strategic partners** in current entrepreneurial activities include, among others, the Entrepreneurs' Association Northern Hesse (Unternehmerverband Nordhessen),<sup>1</sup> the JUNIOR programme<sup>2</sup>, the German Association for International Co-operation (Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, GIZ)<sup>3</sup>, and the Kassel Savings Bank (Kasseler Sparkasse). Each partner is relevant for a specific entrepreneurial activity, contributing to the University's entrepreneurial profile. The Entrepreneurs' Association Northern Hesse supports the University's entrepreneurial activities materially and non-materially. It contributes to funding UniKasselTransfer's incubator and the University's idea competition.<sup>4</sup> JUNIOR is a nation-wide programme for promoting economic and financial education of school children, including business start-ups, operated by the German Economic Institute. Co-operating with the JUNIOR programme provides important insights for educating the next generation of teachers – the University of Kassel is one of the largest institutions in Germany educating vocational school teachers. Co-operation with GIZ is important for an entrepreneurship education project that the University runs in Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, the Kassel Savings Bank is one of the University's most important business partners and the most important financial partner. It accompanied the funding of two thirds of the start-ups from the University.

For supporting start-ups from the University, the University of Kassel established a dedicated body named the **Entrepreneurs Council** (Unternehmer Rat).<sup>5</sup> It includes 20 entrepreneurs from the region, mainly from small and medium-sized enterprises from various industries but also from the larger companies located in the region. They support start-ups from the University by way of consulting (for example about product development), coaching, giving access to their established sales channels, and providing funding as business angels.

Business involvement is also a formal component of the University's organisational structure. There is a **University Board** (Hochschulrat) with the mission to accompany the University's development, to provide guidance on demands from employers and to promote the use of the University's scientific insights and artistic achievements.<sup>6</sup> The board comprises up to ten members from business, science and arts. Currently, one of the board members is a representative from a larger regional enterprise that is deeply involved in the University's research activities.

Vice versa, the University is also involved in regional business bodies. The University's President is a member of the Advisory Board of **Regional Management Nordhessen**,<sup>7</sup> an organisation promoting the region's economic development. This membership represents the University's intention to influence regional governance and development through its research, teaching and transfer activities. According to its transfer concept (p. 28), the University aims at aligning such activities with regional development perspectives and actors – for the sake of using scarce resources efficiently and effectively. This implies focussing on those activities that are particularly important for regional development. For example, the University has contributed to establishing clusters in the fields of logistics, tourism and renewable energies in the region.

Finally, the University has several links that it could develop further towards entrepreneurship in the future. First, the University co-operates with the **Pupils Research Centre** of North Hesse (Schülerforschungszentrum Nordhessen).<sup>8</sup> This activity involves secondary school physics pupils and

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.vhu.de/mitgliedsverbaende/unternehmerverband-nordhessen-e-v-unh.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.junior-programme.de>.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.giz.de>.

<sup>4</sup> For the idea competition see <https://www.uni-kassel.de/einrichtung/ukt/unikat-von-der-idee-zur-gruendung/>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.uni-kassel.de/ukt/unikat/gruenderhochschule/unternehmer-rat.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.uni-kassel.de/uni/universitaet/organisation/gremien/hochschulrat>.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.regionnordhessen.de/regionalmanagement/ueber-uns.html>.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://sfn-kassel.de/>.

has so far been purely research-oriented, i.e. pupils work on practice-oriented research projects with researchers from the University – with no entrepreneurial intentions. However, potentially this initiative could be developed in the direction of seeking business opportunities. Furthermore, the University is reflecting on using its half-yearly meetings with vocational school directors to involve them in entrepreneurship education.

### 3. Links with science parks and incubators

For supporting entrepreneurial activities, the University of Kassel also has dedicated spaces and facilities: It operates a Science Park and an incubator. The University has a **Science Park** on campus, operated together with the City of Kassel as the other shareholder.<sup>9</sup> The Science Park considers itself as a start-up and innovation centre. It has more than 6,000 square meters of administrative offices, technical rooms with the possibility to install laboratory equipment and workshop space for spin-offs from the University. 90% of the offices are rented. The Science Park hosts an “IdeaLab”, which is a large, flexible room that teams of researchers, founders or business people can rent to think and act creatively.<sup>10</sup>

The University seeks cross-fertilisation of collaborative activities through local proximity. All of the University’s **transfer-related organisations** are located in the Science Park building: UniKasselTransfer, the Management School UNIKIMS that offers extra-occupational education in business administration as well as the GINo mbH that markets patents and runs a patent information centre.

Approximately **40 enterprises** or companies-in-being are located at the Science Park Kassel. Most of them are spin-offs from the University. They operate in vastly different fields of business. An example is Sminno, a young firm founded by two engineering students from Afghanistan that offers a hands-free device for bicycles.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, UniKasselTransfer runs an **incubator**.<sup>12</sup> The core incubator tasks are start-up consulting, managing an annual idea competition and managing the Entrepreneurs Council (see above).

### 4. Opportunities for staff and students to take part in innovative activities with the external environment

The University has several well-established **facilities** that enable students’ interaction with the external environment. These include above all the Science Park’s IdeaLab, the incubator and crowdfunding services, as mentioned above. UNIKAT crowdfunding was the first crowdfunding platform in Germany established by a university.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond these established facilities, the University seeks to involve its entrepreneurial staff and students with **public life** in the city on special occasions. Recent major examples include exhibits at the Documenta 2017,<sup>14</sup> the international arts exhibition that takes place in Kassel every five years. At the Documenta, students presented several projects of the University’s Centre for Entrepreneurial Thinking and Acting. These included: “Periptero – the Culture Kiosk” as an example of Greek way of life,<sup>15</sup> the “krisenKONTERKIOSK” for sustainable agriculture,<sup>16</sup> and the “Studimat” which is a vending machine with students’ requisites.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the University offers several **events** that facilitate contacts between students and staff with external experts. For example, every first Tuesday a month, the Science Park community convenes, and

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.sciencepark-kassel.de/science-park/information-in-english>.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.sciencepark-kassel.de/raum/idea-lab/>.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.sminno.de>.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.uni-kassel.de/inkubator>.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.startnext.com/pages/unikat#projects>.

<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.documenta14.de/en/>.

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.hna.de/kassel/stadt-und-kreis-kassel-ort760929/kassel-uni-kiosk-documenta-13582851.html>.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.foodoctopia.de/krisenkonterkiosk>.

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.kassel-live.de/2017/07/21/studimat-versorgt-studenten/>.

external business people join these meetings. An example of an extra-curricular entrepreneurship activity is a “Failure Night” where even seasoned business people present on how they once failed.

Finally, **delegations from foreign countries** inside and outside Europe frequently visit the University to learn about the University’s entrepreneurial approach. Recent examples include visits from China, Argentine, Egypt and Hungary.<sup>18</sup> These delegation visits offer the University’s staff and students opportunities to reflect about the University’s concept and achievements in entrepreneurial thinking and acting.

## **5. How the University of Kassel integrates research, education and knowledge transfer to exploit new knowledge**

In summary, the University of Kassel is integrating entrepreneurship education, research and knowledge transfer through a range of targeted organisational bodies, facilities and activities. Based on a codified strategic approach to entrepreneurship, the University has established and is developing a specific entrepreneurial approach. This approach is characterised by inclusiveness and cooperativeness: The approach includes the whole university and it involves collaboration and knowledge exchange with the outside world.

### **Source**

This case study was prepared by Stefan Lilischkis from empirica Gesellschaft für Kommunikations- und Technologieforschung mbH, Bonn, Germany, through collection and analysis of broad documentation about the University of Kassel and interviews with key representatives from the University.

The status of information provided in this case study is November 2017.

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### **Key links**

UNIKAT: <http://www.uni-kassel.de/ukt/unikat>

Forschungs- und Lehrzentrum für unternehmerisches Denken und Handeln (Fludh): <http://www.uni-kassel.de/ukt/forschungs-und-lehrzentrum-fuer-unternehmerisches-denken-und-handeln/startseite.html>

Transferkonzept 2016 – 2020, Universität Kassel, status 22 May 2017.

UniKasselTransfer: <https://www.uni-kassel.de/ukt/en/home.html>

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<sup>18</sup> For Hungary see <http://www.uni-kassel.de/ukt/forschungs-und-lehrzentrum-fuer-unternehmerisches-denken-und-handeln/aktuelles/meldung/article/besuch-aus-ungarn-im-forschungs-und-lehrzentrum-fuer-unternehmerisches-denken-und-handeln-fludh.html>.