Enabling Conditions for Impact-Oriented Transfer & Cooperation

Workshop SUD 2026 – Leo Gilliard, WWF

1st of September 2026

Creating Societal Impact

Enabling conditions for impactful transfer and cooperation in Swiss higher education

Focus of the workshop (60')

- What enables Swiss universities to generate societal impact through transfer and cooperation?
- Which institutional conditions make a transfer & cooperation project actually transformative and impact-oriented?

Workshop flow | 60'

1. Framing input | 15'
Third Mission, societal impact, cooperation formats, enabling conditions and the Swiss context

2. Learning from experience | 20'
Small-group discussions on success factors, barriers and institutional conditions

3. Moving towards an enabling ecosystem | 25'
Collective prioritisation of realistic and promising directions for Swiss higher education

Goal: Moving from isolated projects to conditions that enable societal impact to emerge, persist and spread.

From Research Outputs to Societal Impact

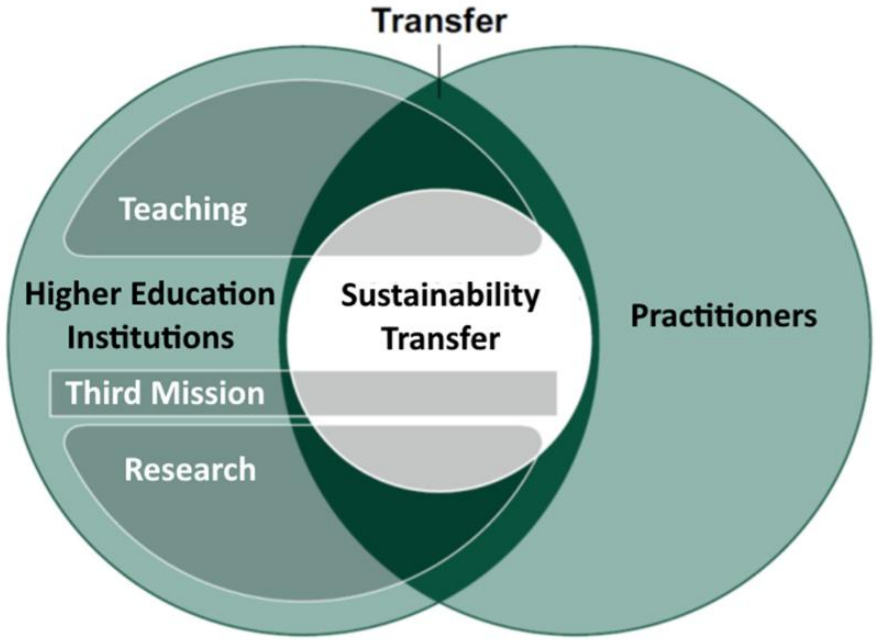
Sustainability research can generate different types of results:

- **Academic outputs**
  Publications, models, methods and scientific knowledge
- **Transfer outputs**
  Tools, guidelines, training, prototypes and policy recommendations
- **Societal outcomes**
  Changes in practices, decisions, capacities and relationships
- **Transformative impact**
  Lasting changes in institutions, policies and socio-technical systems

→ Transfer is not the final dissemination stage of research. It must be built into the project from the beginning

The Third Mission: Creating Value Beyond Teaching and Research

The Third Mission = third core function of universities alongside teaching and research



Many sustainability challenges are well understood... The bottleneck is often not knowledge, but implementation

⟶ What enables Swiss universities to turn knowledge into societal impact ?

Source: Demele et al 2021.

Formats for Transfer and Cooperation

Format	Features
Co-creation	Societal actors contribute to defining challenges, developing solutions and shaping implementation.
Citizen science	Members of the public actively contribute to the research process, for example by collecting data, interpreting results or defining research questions.
Transdisciplinary research	Researchers from different disciplines and societal actors jointly address complex real-world challenges and integrate different forms of knowledge.
Community-based research	Research is developed with and for a specific community, which is actively involved throughout the project.
Living labs and real-world laboratories	Researchers and societal actors jointly develop, test and evaluate solutions in real-world settings, combining experimentation with scientific and societal learning.

What Makes a Project Transformative?

Transformative sustainability projects:

- Start from a clearly defined societal challenge
- Involve relevant societal actors in shaping the project
- Combine scientific and practice-based knowledge
- Create space for experimentation and mutual learning
- Build capacities beyond the project consortium
- Aim for (long-lasting) changes in policies, institutions or established practices

→ Transformative research is not only about producing knowledge. It is about increasing society's capacity to act...

The Swiss Context

Swiss higher education offers favourable conditions:

- Strong regional anchoring of universities and universities of applied sciences
- Proximity to municipalities, cantons, public administrations and businesses
- Federalism as a space for experimentation
- Existing transfer offices, networks and funding instruments
- High potential for cooperation across linguistic and institutional boundaries

… but transfer projects also face recurring challenges:

- Fragmented and short-term funding
- Different timelines between research and practice
- Limited recognition in academic careers
- Unclear ownership and responsibilities
- Difficulties in sustaining partnerships after project funding ends


Discussion in pairs
2x10' - What Makes a Project Transformative and Impact-Oriented?

Round One: looking at successful projects

Think of a transfer or cooperation project at your university that created tangible societal impact.

What made the impact possible?

- A relevant societal challenge?
- The right partners?
- Trust and continuity?
- Adequate funding and time?
- Institutional support?
- Strong leadership?
- A favourable political window?
- A willingness to experiment?

Which framework condition was decisive?
What would probably have happened if this condition had been missing?

Round Two: looking at failures

1) **Think of a promising sustainability project that failed to create impact. Why? What could have been done differently?**

2) **At which stage did the project get stuck?**

- Problem definition
- Funding
- Stakeholder engagement
- Implementation
- Institutionalization
- Scaling

Group Discussion

20' - Moving from isolated projects to an enabling ecosystem for societal impact

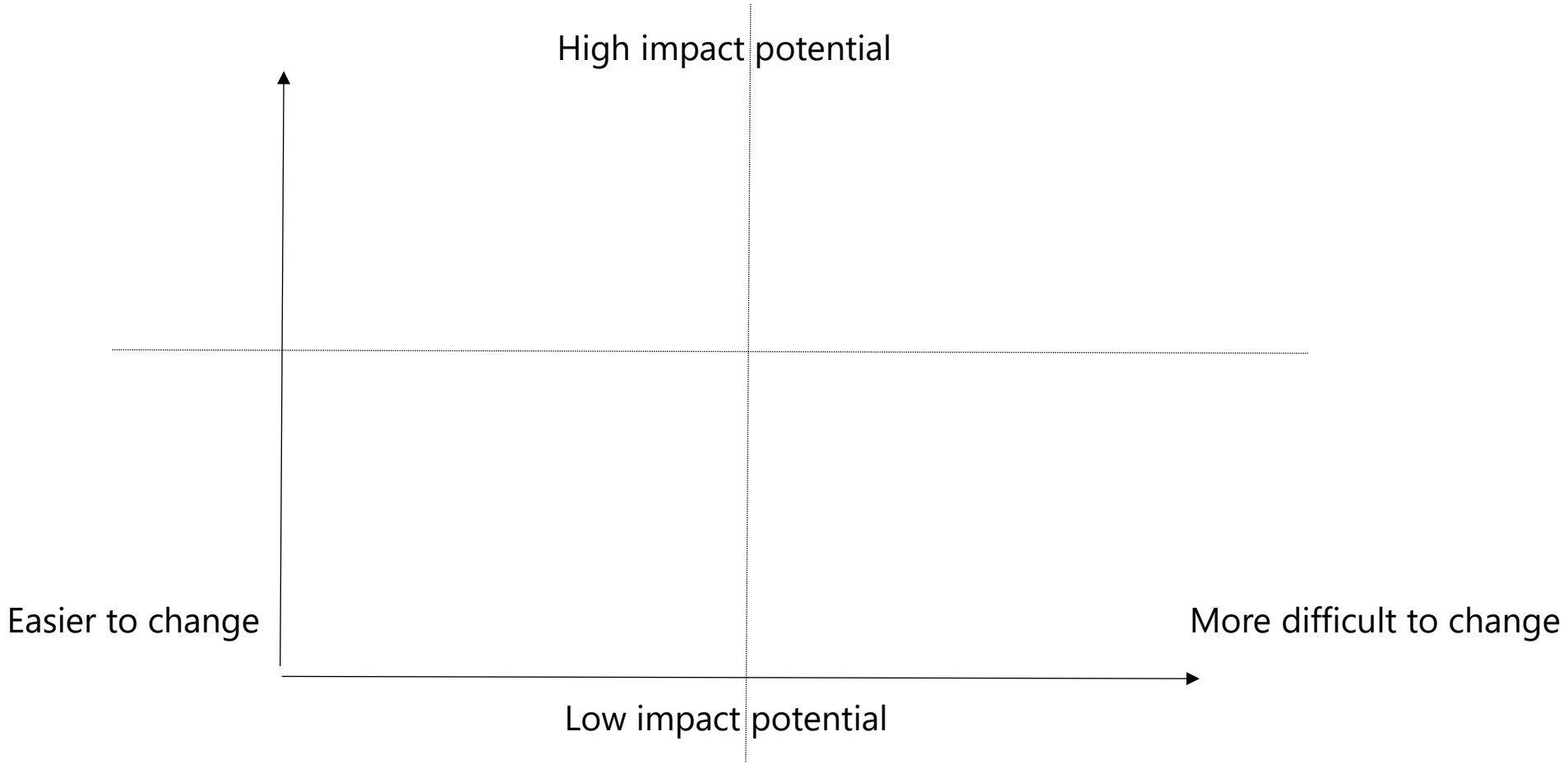
Transition to Group Exchange

If your institution wanted to double its societal impact by 2030, which framework condition would need to change first?

- Strategy and leadership?
- Funding models?
- Incentives and career recognition?
- Dedicated staff and coordination capacity?
- Long-term partnerships?
- Organisational culture?
- Administrative flexibility?

From Project to System: Transition to Group Exchange

Not all conditions are equal...



Thank you !

Share back notes

1. What does meaningful collaboration with practitioners look like? What is needed to make it work?

Pflichtkriterien		
Kriterium	**Anforderungen**	**Maximal-punktzahl**
Ganzheitlicher, nachhaltiger Ansatz	• Klare Problemdefinition und Darstellung, wie dieser Ansatz zu einem transformativen Strukturwandel beiträgt • Existenz einer umfassenden, **nachhaltigen** Vision, die **mindestens zwei der vier** nachfolgenden Dimensionen integriert: ökologische, ökonomische, soziale und Gerechtigkeit	**3**
Innovativer Ansatz	• Integration einer **innovativen/disruptiven** technischen, sozialen und/oder prozessualen Innovation • Klare Darstellung der innovativen und einzigartigen Merkmale dieses Ansatzes und des damit angestrebten **sozial-ökologischen Impacts**	**3**
Akteure & Netzwerk	• Bildung formeller und informeller Netzwerke zur Unterstützung und Verstärkung der Transformationsprozesse • **Kooperation** mit einem vielfältigen Akteurskreis aus **mindestens zwei** verschiedenen Gruppen, darunter Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft, NGOs, Politik und weitere relevante Akteure, um umfassende Perspektiven und Interessen abzudecken ○ *Oder: Gezielte Stärkung einer unterrepräsentierten Gruppe*	**3**
Langfristigkeit & Beständigkeit	• Fokus auf langfristigen Zielen (Laufzeit von mind. 5 Jahren) • Sicherstellen, dass Maßnahme/Projekt/Initiative über politische Wahlzyklen und individuelle Akteure hinaus Bestand hat	**3**
Praktische Anwendung, Erprobung & Evaluations-mechanismen	• Durchführung von Experimenten/Living Labs etc. zur praktischen Anwendung und Erprobung der Lösungen in realen Kontexten ○ *Oder: Konkreter Plan dies durchzuführen (z.B. ein Projekt im Anfangsstadium)* • Kontinuierliche Evaluierung der Projekte, Akteure, Aktivitäten, Netzwerke und Teilziele, sowie Identifikation von Barrieren und Chancen → Nutzen der Evaluation zum aktiven Lernen und Weiterentwickeln	**3**
Skalierbarkeit & Replizierbarkeit	• Fähigkeit des Projekts, bei Bedarf auf größere Maßstäbe übertragen und in verschiedenen Kontexten repliziert zu werden • Ziel: Innovation soll von der Nische ins Regime kommen • *Ausnahme: Kleine, lokal angepasste und maßgeschneiderte Lösungen bieten spezifische Vorteile und sind nicht immer replizierbar oder skalierbar*	**3**

Recommendations

1. **Strategy**: Development and implementation of a third mission strategy on a national level by swissuniversities and at individual university level
2. **Framework conditions**: expand funding structures, resources and cross-university collaboration to strengthen the third mission, and in particular transfer and cooperation projects for the sustainability transformation; in state research and innovation funding, specifically promote transfer and cooperation projects for the sustainability transformation
3. **Approaches and projects**: start from a relevant sustainability challenge and tackle, implement and further develop it in an ambitious and scalable manner
4. **Understanding of transfer**: develop a transfer mindset at universities; involve practice partners right from the design stage and cooperate on an equal footing; strive for co-creation
5. **Students**: involve them more closely; involve more students through links with practical modules and utilize these for the practical acquisition of knowledge and the development of students' skills; harness students' potential and creativity through student projects