

“The Transfer of Knowledge”: European Best Practices in Evidence-informed Knowledge Transfer. Models for Export?

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1 Introduction

In academia, knowledge transfer refers to the sharing of innovative ideas, research findings, experiences and competencies among academics, government, enterprises, and society. From the viewpoint of higher education, it corresponds to “third mission” engagements (Henke et al. 2017). Knowledge transfer occurs not only between individuals but also within organizations and across organizations and communities. We investigate knowledge transfer in education. The importance of knowledge transfer across research, practice, politics and civil society in education is undisputed. At the same time, a noticeable gap remains between research and non-scientific communities in education (Gräsel 2010, Diederichs & Desoye (eds.) 2023). This gap can be described as a discrepancy to meet the expectations associated with knowledge transfer: on the one hand, there are expectations for educational research to impact practice with findings, and on the other hand, there are expectations for educational practice to integrate research findings into practice. The gap can be explained by the inherent complexity of knowledge transfer across domains, which involves divergent conceptualizations of knowledge, uncertainties regarding its practical application, and challenges in identifying, implementing and evaluating effective transfer approaches (Malin & Brown 2020, McMahon, Legget & Carroll 2022).

Efforts to strengthen knowledge transfer at the European level have led to the development of transfer research within the context of evidence-informed policy-making as well as the establishment of specialized organizations and institutional structures (OECD 2023).

Evidence-informed policy-making is a process whereby political decisions are based on information drawn from multiple sources, including data, statistics, and findings from research and evaluation. To ensure balanced decision-making and to guide policy and budgetary choices effectively, the process of evidence synthesis is based on rigorous methodological standards, commonly subsumed under the umbrella of systematic reviews (OECD 2020).

Two European transfer actors and their approaches are flagship initiatives of evidence-informed policy-making in education: the *British Education Endowment Foundation* (EEF) with its Teaching and Learning Toolkit and the *Dutch Het Nationaal Regieorgaan Onderwijsonderzoek* (NRO), which has adopted EEF's toolkit but also developed and runs the Kennisrotonde (knowledge roundabout). Their activities, including practice-oriented materials as well as dissemination and institutional anchoring strategies, are widely regarded as prototypes for transfer and are positively assessed in the research literature (cf. Locher, Unger, Hartmann, Hochweber, 2023; OECD 2023).

In the following, the two European initiatives will be characterized regarding their key aspects and instruments in chapter 2. They are fundamental to our own study which examines how European experiences can be adapted to the German educational context and specifically to the German Education Server. Chapter 3 outlines the applied research method, while chapter 4 presents results and raises further questions concerning the conditions of transfer and adaptation for Germany.

2 Two European Flagship Initiatives

The *Education Endowment Foundation* (EEF) in England serves an example of an institutionalized approach to evidence-informed knowledge transfer in education. Established as an independent charity, EEF has developed evidence-based knowledge tailored to the needs of schools since 2016. Its core instrument for knowledge transfer is the *EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit*, which currently consists of concise and accessible research summaries covering around 30 thematic areas. These summaries are free of charge, available online and were based on systematic reviews of international research based on rigorous methodological standards. Each topic within the Toolkit is categorized according to implementation cost, strength of evidence, and estimated impact. Impact is expressed in months of learning progress, calculated by comparing outcomes for pupils who participated in each intervention with those who did not. This approach reflects the methodological rigor underpinning the Toolkit, as studies based on randomized controlled trials are included in the evidence base only. The overarching objective of the EEF Toolkit is to support school leaders in making informed, evidence-based decisions regarding the effective allocation of educational funding.

The *EEF Toolkit* is exclusively grounded in research evidence and does not directly incorporate practitioners' experiences. It primarily functions as an overview of thematic areas, with a particular emphasis on interventions that have demonstrated effectiveness in previous studies. Accordingly,

the Toolkit is intended as a starting point for evidence-informed decision making rather than a prescriptive guide. For effective implementation in schools, the summarized evidence must be interpreted in light of specific institutional contexts, complemented by additional sources of data, and considered alongside professional judgment in the decision-making process.

To support this contextualization, EEF provides complementary implementation resources. Each Toolkit strand is accompanied by a guidance report that offers step-by-step recommendations for implementation. In addition, EEF coordinates a network of Research Schools that support other schools in interpreting research findings and translating them into practice through professional development activities, practical examples, and peer-to-peer exchange. Insights from these practice-oriented activities inform the broader work of the EEF, although they do not feed directly back into the Toolkit itself. At present, the Toolkit's evidence base includes studies published up to 2021. The impact of the EEF's knowledge transfer activities is assessed using a range of indicators, including download figures, participation rates, and ongoing evaluative measures based on surveys and other feedback instruments.

Beyond its national focus, EEF has established a global network of partners that adapt the Toolkit to local contexts and educational systems while maintaining its evidence-based methodology.

The Netherlands are one of the European countries that are part of this international network. *Het Nationaal Regieorgaan Onderwijsonderzoek* (NRO) has adapted the EEF Toolkit as part of various initiatives aiming to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the NRO has broadened the evidence-informed approach by the Kennisrotonde to include a bi-directional perspective on transfer. The *Kennisrotonde* is designed to provide evidencebased responses to practice oriented questions submitted online by school leaders and teachers. Once a practice-based question is submitted, it is refined into a research question through a personal consultation with a so-called knowledge broker. These brokers are (external) researchers based throughout the Netherlands. Their role in the brokering process, through which research findings are translated into practice-relevant answers, requires a high level of expertise in research communication. This phase is both central and methodologically demanding, as it involves distinguishing between practitioners' information needs and those questions that can be meaningfully addressed through research evidence. In this context, practitioners may recognize that not all practical concerns can be translated into research questions and that research does not always provide direct answers to practice-based problems. As a result, the number of questions submitted exceeds the number of questions that can ultimately be answered.

Once a question has been sufficiently clarified, knowledge brokers compile an evidence-based response drawing on the current research literature. The final answer is typically delivered to the questioner within approximately ten weeks. To date, around 800 evidence-informed answers to practical educational questions have been produced and are publicly available on the *Kennisrotonde* website. In addition to the formal responses provided through the *Kennisrotonde*, a range of supplementary materials is available online free of charge. These materials include practitioners' reflective reports, webinars, videos, and information sheets designed to support the use of evidence-based an-

swers for changes in professional practice or pedagogical orientation (van den Berg & Pins 2023). No further structured knowledge transfer measures are currently in place. While usage statistics indicate a high level of engagement with the Kennisrotonde, its broader impact on educational practice remains unclear, as systematic impact assessments using additional evaluative methods have not yet been conducted.

The table below presents the key characteristics of the EEF Toolkit and the Kennisrotonde. It highlights their differences and similarities and provides a concise overview of two major instruments aimed at facilitating the transfer of research evidence into educational practice.

	EEF Toolkit	NKO Kennisrotonde
General Information	Organisation: Education Endowment Foundation Running time Toolkit: since 2018 Budget: 30,2 £ (2023/24) Number of employees: ca. 120	Organisation: Nationaal Kennisinstituut Onderwijs Running time: since 2015 Budget: Ministry of education, various other financial sources, 800.000 EUR (2016-2022) Number of employees: 30 free-lance brokers, 3 inhouse brokers, 6 project managers
Stakeholder	Teachers Senior Leaders Decision Makers	Teachers School leaders Administrators involved in school development Researchers in education
Transfer Activities	Maintaining a literature database Delivering 30 systematic reviews Establishing networks and practice partnerships Supporting network partners in the implementation process	Collecting questions from practice Assessing whether the questions are suitable for being answered by brokers Recruiting a pool of experts from research as brokers Training the experts Enabling direct exchange between questioner from practice and responder from research Publication and dissemination
Output	Summaries of 30 educational topics based on rigorous systematic reviews	1,500 answered questions based on research literature, 650 published in an online
Implementation	Publication and dissemination Accompanying implementation of measures in the extended networks e.g. regional partnerships, research schools, International Evidence for Education Network by providing exchange and support formats funding of projects	Publication or dissemination of questions and transfer products No further implementation activities

	EEF Toolkit	NKO Kennisrotunde
Evaluation / Quality assurance	Rigorous systematic reviews by the University of Durham	Factchecking the answers by three internal brokers
	Feedback and Survey of practice partners	Updating the published answers every three years
	Web indicators such as download figures and page views	External evaluation 2020
		Survey of questioners
		Web indicators such as downloads and page views
		Evaluation of interaction on social media

Table 1: Characteristics of EEF Toolkit and Kennisrotunde

These two flagship initiatives demonstrate well-established practices that seek to address the complex challenge of knowledge transfer in education. We took these examples as a starting point to examine the conditions under which such initiatives can be meaningfully adapted to different institutional and national contexts, focusing on Germany. Key questions of our own study include: To what extent can evidence from one country’s educational system and research culture be applied to another? Which aspects are crucial for a successful “*transfer of transfer*”?

By using the term “*transfer of transfer*”, we indicate a shift in the analytical focus in examining how established approaches to knowledge transfer can be translated, adapted, and implemented moving from one context to another. This concept draws on insights from comparative international education research. This field is widely recognized for large-scale comparative assessment studies such as PISA, which generate evidence for cross-national learning and policy development. From a national perspective, international comparisons function as mechanisms for quality improvement by identifying systemic strengths and weaknesses and fostering collaboration among countries and institutions. From a global perspective, international educational research is indispensable, as solutions to major educational challenges can only be developed through a global scientific community. In this sense, the “*transfer of transfer*” extends beyond the movement of knowledge itself; it encompasses the exchange of methods, practices, and learning processes that enable actors to learn from one another and adapt successful approaches to individual contexts.

3 Method

The study was conducted across two closely interlinked phases, using two different research methods. The initial phase involved an in-depth analysis of EEF’s *Toolkit* and NRO’s *Kennisrotunde*. Employing a content analysis, detailed catalogues of services, materials for practice and dissemination strategies for embedding evidence-informed teaching were examined along the categories of general information, stakeholder, transfer activities, output, implementation, evaluation /quality assurance and core components.

These categories led up to the content analysis that built the groundwork for semi-structured inter-

views which were conducted with individuals responsible for the programmes (one interview per institution with two representatives). The interviews clarified remaining questions but were neither recorded nor analysed along the line of a qualitative analysis. Summaries of the interviews were produced and discussed by the project team. The interview with NRO focussed on the question of how the EEF Toolkit was adopted and received in educational practice. Consequently, key components of each action and instruments were identified.

In the second phase of the study, we examined the conditions of an implementation of best practices from the Netherlands and United Kingdom into the German context. We focussed on perspectives and logics of action of four key stakeholder groups involved in different knowledge transfer processes.

The first group consisted of eight teachers (two each from vocational schools, special needs schools, secondary schools, elementary schools). Their thematic requirements, the processing of scientific findings and the appropriate dissemination structures are crucial for the adaptation of the Toolkit and the Kennisrotonde.

The second key stakeholder group consisted of teacher training experts in Germany's federal states (Bundesländer), in particular the pedagogical institutes and quality institutions, as well as transfer structures of the Bundesländer. Ten Bundesländer were represented in the group discussions, some by several participants. These institutions are important for the engagement of schools and teachers in the proposed transfer structures.

The third group of stakeholders comprised educational researchers and individuals working at clearing houses at German universities. Ten individuals participated in the group discussions, five with a long-standing involvement in the topic and five working on clearing and transfer in current project-based initiatives. Their prior experiences are an important point of reference for evaluating the examined models for their adaptation.

As a fourth group, we focused on experts in educational technologies to explore dissemination systems and technical options for processing research knowledge (Fahrer, Wilmers and Rittberger 2023). Eight experts involved in information infrastructure participated here. Their insights regarding the use of AI- based literature extraction tools may contribute to extending the scope of the two transfer models.

All stakeholder groups were invited to moderated group discussions, where their unique perspectives were discussed and shared. The format was chosen to provide, within a structured discussion setting, both insights into the respective transfer-related areas of work and an opportunity to address experiences of success. The simultaneous presence of representatives from several institutions made similarities and differences clearly visible. The discussion was documented, and the results were generated based on the discussion records.

4 Findings

The findings are based on systematically documented content analysis of two flagship initiatives and discussions with practitioners and experts. They represent a synthesis of experiences, needs and perspectives. The study sought to inform design decisions for the development of an information platform by adopting a user-centred research approach.

The following section outlines and discusses three key findings:

4.1 Evidence Summaries

Across sectors, participants in the round tables emphasized a strong demand for well translated research findings that are presented in accessible, practice-oriented formats to support classroom decision-making. International instruments such as the Toolkit and the Kennisrotonde offer promising starting points. However, these tools cannot be transferred directly. Substantial contextual adaptation is required to ensure their relevance and legitimacy within the German Education Server.

Regarding the EEF Toolkit, adaptation would necessitate broadening the underlying evidence base to incorporate studies that are more closely aligned with the German education system. This would require the integration of more recent research as well as studies that do not rely on randomized controlled trials, which are less common in German educational research. As a result, the categorization system of the EEF Toolkit, which allows at-a-glance evaluation of each intervention, cannot be maintained for the German context as it relies solely on quantifiable research outcomes. Consequently, the EEF Toolkit would need to be complemented by additional evidence synthesis and contextualization materials. Providing such transfer-oriented resources would support users in interpreting and applying research findings within their specific contexts, thereby facilitating effective knowledge transfer.

The question-answer service of the Kennisrotonde offer valuable guidance for a system design. Nevertheless, a functional equivalent for Germany and its German Education Server needs to be developed from scratch. Such a service should be oriented toward everyday questions of German educational practitioners. A translation of existing content is not recommended, because the responses provided by the Dutch Kennisrotonde are grounded in the Dutch national research traditions and institutional contexts.

Therefore, both initiatives offer valuable ideas, instruments and materials, but all services need to be adapted to the German context.

4.2 Clearing and transfer activities

The second key finding aligns with existing research on evidence use in education: Clearing activities require targeted transfer mechanisms to be effective. In everyday school practice, keeping abreast of current research typically occupies a low priority. Consequently, the provision of evidence summaries alone is insufficient to ensure their uptake and application. Structured transfer

activities are therefore essential to support the implementation of evidence-based knowledge in classroom practices.

A frequently cited example is the EEF's school network, which promotes the use of evidence through structured school-to-school collaboration. While this approach appears promising, it remains highly resource intensive. The EEF allocates a substantial proportion of its personnel—approximately 120 staff members—to supporting schools in England alone. By contrast, the NRO offers complementary formats to the Kennisrotonde, such as testimonials from educational practice, which may have inspirational value. However, the extent of their impact on evidence uptake and instructional change remains unclear. Further empirical research is needed to assess the effectiveness of formats such as webinars and supplementary information materials.

4.3 Bi-directional Transfer

Bi-directional transfer is widely regarded within the German educational landscape as the preferred mode of interaction between research and practice, as it enables reciprocal learning and mutual understanding. However, such engagement requires sustained time investment, organizational commitment, and structural support—conditions that are currently insufficiently met across sectors. As a result, knowledge transfer often takes the form of occasional, predominantly unidirectional-activities, typically from research to practice, rather than continuous, reciprocal exchange.

Even the initiatives examined in this study exhibit limitations in this regard, as they do not yet provide sufficiently institutionalized spaces for dialogue, encounter and joint sense-making between researchers and practitioners. Through their direct engagement with implementation contexts, practitioners provide insights into emerging needs, practical constraints, and the applicability of knowledge. These perspectives can help researchers identify relevant questions, refine theoretical assumptions, and ensure that research activities address real-world challenges. EEF, for example, incorporates feedback from practitioners to refine its services and products, positioning practice as a source of resonance for iterative improvement. The Kennisrotonde facilitates one-to-one clearing conversations between practitioners seeking evidence-based answers and researchers. These exchanges have proven informative for both sides, as they elucidate differing logics of action, including variations of goals, responsibilities, procedural norms, and decision-making-processes. Nonetheless, the outreach of these interaction formats remains limited, engaging only relatively few participants to date.

4.4 Brokering Institutions

The final key finding highlights the need for dedicated brokering institutions, as access to schools for research purposes remains limited and research activities generally occupy a low priority within everyday school practice. The primary function of brokering institutions is to act as a mediator between different communities of practice and knowledge, such as those in research, practice, and politics. The goal of their work is to initiate exchange processes and promote mutual understanding

of the specific rationales for action within each sector, thereby laying the foundation for cross-community partnerships and evidence-based action (MacKillop et al., 2020). Such intermediaries—whether organizations or individuals—establish access to both research and practice to facilitate effective knowledge transfer. EEF and NRO offer convincing processes and instruments for such a transfer model. They operate under formal mandates issued by their respective Ministries of Education, which do not only legitimize their activities but also grant them direct access to schools. Furthermore, their work is closely connected to academic institutions. For instance, the University of Durham supports the EEF in the production of systematic reviews, while the Kennisrotonde's broker pool is largely composed of researchers affiliated with Dutch universities. Notably, both organizations primarily address school leaders rather than individual teachers. This strategic focus reflects the governance structures in England and the Netherlands, where school leaders possess substantial authority over resource allocation and organizational decision-making. By contrast, the German education system is characterized by a higher degree of fragmentation. Decision-making authority is dispersed across multiple institutional levels and actors, requiring transfer strategies to be more differentiated. Accordingly, targeting school leaders alone is unlikely to suffice; instead, a broader range of stakeholders should be engaged.

5 Conclusion

The findings should be interpreted in light of the study's scope and purpose. Conducted as a user research study to inform the implementation of two European transfer best practices within a specific information platform, the study primarily draws on the perspectives of experts and practitioners with extensive experience in knowledge transfer and information provision. While these stakeholders offer valuable insights grounded in practice, their perspectives may not fully reflect those of less experienced users or organizations with more limited transfer capacities. Moreover, the recommendations emerged from discussions situated within a particular institutional and policy context and should therefore not be assumed to be directly transferable to other settings without careful adaptation. Finally, although the discussion format facilitated the identification of shared priorities and challenges, it may also have privileged certain viewpoints over others. As a result, less prominent or dissenting perspectives may be underrepresented in the findings.

Nevertheless, our findings indicate three key conditions that appear essential for the successful adaptation of international models such as the EEF Toolkit and the Kennisrotonde. First, a clear institutional mandate is required. Adaptation initiatives should be formally supported by education authorities of the Bundesländer and by intermediary institutions that can assume a brokering role and facilitate access to schools. Without such endorsement, both legitimacy and effective outreach remain limited. Secondly, adequate and sustained resources are essential. Adaptation processes need stable long-term funding rather than short-term project financing to ensure continuity, institutional learning, and lasting impact. Thirdly, strong and durable partnerships are necessary. A consortium that systematically integrates infrastructure providers, educational practice, and research institutions

is crucial to safeguard relevance, scientific credibility, and practical usability of the adapted tools.

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