

Investigating institutional pathways for inter- and transdisciplinarity (PATHWAYS)

Project information sheet

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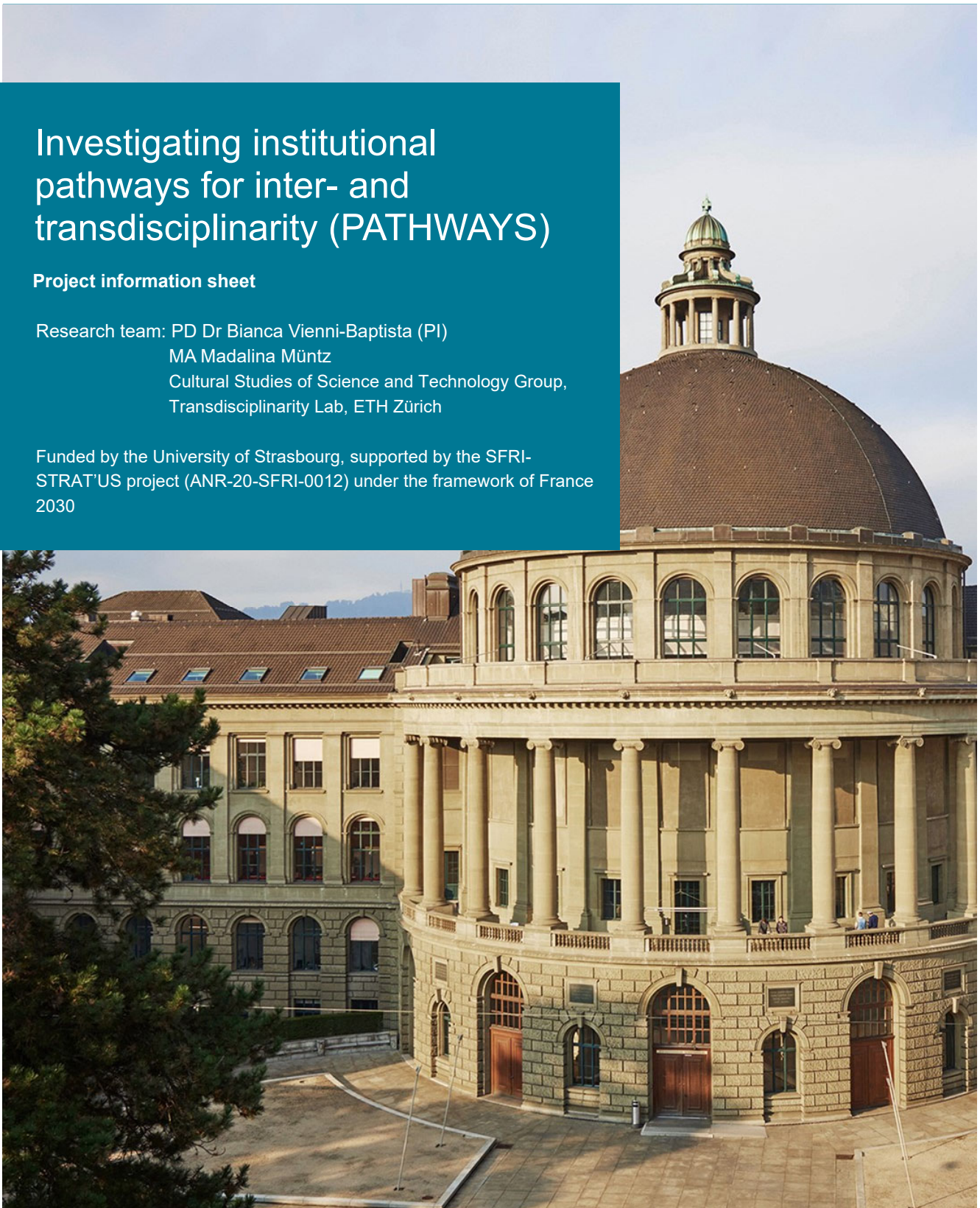


Table of Contents

Executive summary	3
Research plan	4
Expected outcomes	6
Relevance for the ITIs	7
Ethical considerations	7
Contact	9
Annex 1: Consent Form	10

Executive summary

Many of today's societal challenges are complex and cannot be addressed within a single discipline. For several decades, scholars and policymakers have therefore argued that universities need to support more integrative and collaborative forms of research and teaching that bring together different fields of expertise and societal actors.^{1 2} These approaches, often referred to as **interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity (ITD)**, are widely discussed in the literature and there is no single agreed definition of these concepts. In general terms, **interdisciplinarity** involves integrating perspectives and methods from different academic disciplines, while **transdisciplinarity** extends this integration beyond academia by incorporating knowledge and perspectives from societal actors, stakeholders, or communities of practice.^{3 4}

Despite this long-standing interest, universities around the world still face challenges in embedding ITD approaches within organisational structures and everyday academic practices.⁵ At the same time, expectations for universities to contribute to the understanding and resolution of complex societal issues continue to grow. Integrating ITD approaches into research, teaching, and institutional strategies has therefore become increasingly important, yet doing so often requires adjustments to funding models, evaluation systems, and organisational culture.⁶

At the University of Strasbourg, the **Interdisciplinary Thematic Institutes (ITIs)** play a central role in supporting this type of work. Each ITI brings together researchers, educators, professional staff and partners around a shared theme, creating new opportunities for collaboration across disciplines and domains.

While the ITIs provide an important framework for interdisciplinary initiatives, it is important to better understand how these approaches work in practice: how they are organised, what supports them, and what challenges may arise when implementing them within existing institutional structures.

The **overall goal of this study** is to examine how ITD initiatives at the University of Strasbourg are being institutionalized, and their impact pathways and potential avenues for productive interactions in the long-term. This goal will be achieved by pursuing two specific objectives:

Specific Objective 1: To analyse ITD research and training practices and processes at the ITIs to provide grounded knowledge and systematise the productive interactions between scholars, students and societal actors; and

¹ Jantsch, E. (1972). Inter- and transdisciplinary university: A systems approach to education and innovation. *Higher Education*, 1(1), 7–37.

² Apostel, L., Berger, G., Briggs, A., & Michaud, G. (Eds.). (1972). *Interdisciplinarity: Problems of teaching and research in universities*. OECD.

³ Bammer, G., O'Rourke, M., O'Connell, D., Neuhauser, L., Midgley, G., Klein, J. T., Grigg, N. J., Gadlin, H., Elsum, I. R., Bursztyn, M., Fulton, E. A., Pohl, C., Smithson, M., Vilsmaier, U., Bergmann, M., Jaeger, J., Merx, F., Vienni Baptista, B., Burgman, M. A., Walker, D. H., Young, J., Bradbury, H., Crawford, L., Haryanto, B., Pachanee, C.-A., Polk, M., & Richardson, G. P. (2020). Expertise in research integration and implementation for tackling complex problems: When is it needed, where can it be found and how can it be strengthened? *Palgrave Communications*, 6(1), Article 5.

⁴ von Wehrden, H., Guimarães, M. H., Bina, O., Varanda, M., Lang, D. J., John, B., Gralla, F., Alexander, D., Raines, D., White, A., & Lawrence, R. J. (2019). Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research: Finding the common ground of multi-faceted concepts. *Sustainability Science*, 14(3), 875–888.

⁵ Carolan, M. S. (2024). Do universities support solutions-oriented collaborative research? Constraints to wicked problems scholarship in higher education. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11, Article 2893.

⁶ Vienni-Baptista, B., & Klein, J. T. (Eds.). (2022). Conclusion: A framework for institutionalizing inter- and trans-disciplinary research and teaching in higher education. In B. Vienni-Baptista & J. T. Klein (Eds.), *Institutionalizing interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity: Collaboration across cultures and communities* (pp. 232–248). Routledge.

Specific Objective 2: To contribute to the University of Strasbourg's policies and funding concerning the impacts, evaluation, and decision-making processes of ITD research and training. This includes a nuanced analysis of the underlying challenges and opportunities to uncover institutional best practices of funding and evaluation.

The project will be implemented over 27 months and is funded by the University of Strasbourg, supported by IdEx Unistra (ANR-10-IDEX-0002), and by SFRI-STRAT'US project (ANR-20-SFRI-0012) under the framework of France 2030.

Research plan

The study is structured into three work packages. Each is related to one of the specific objectives:

Objective 1, Work Package 1: Institutional setting

This work package examines the institutional context shaping ITD initiatives at the University of Strasbourg and is structured around two tasks.

Task 1.1 analyses approximately 100 institutional documents, including ITI funding call materials, university strategies and policy documents, and ITI mid-term evaluation reports. These confidential documents, provided by the University of Strasbourg under signed agreements, will be coded following a Grounded Theory approach^{7,8}. The analysis will identify the institutional rationales, governance structures, and policy expectations shaping the development of the ITIs.

Task 1.2 complemented this analysis through group discussions with ITI coordinators and project managers. During the project kick-off meeting in March 2026, four group discussions were conducted with approximately 6–8 participants each. Moderated by the research team, the discussions explored how interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are understood across the institutes, and the challenges of implementing ITD activities.

Objective 1, Work Package 2: Institutionalisation in practice

Work package 2 examines how ITD research and training are implemented within the 15 ITIs, focusing on organisational practices, collaboration processes, and institutional conditions shaping these initiatives. It is structured around two tasks.

Task 2.1 aims to capture broad institutional perspectives by providing an overview of how ITD research and teaching are experienced across the institutes. An online survey will be distributed to ITI members, including academic and professional staff, and students. The survey will explore experiences, perceptions, and expectations related to ITD research and training and will help identify key themes and variations across the institutes. The findings will provide an institutional overview and will inform the subsequent qualitative data collection.

Building on the survey results, **Task 2.2** investigates how ITD research and training are implemented in practice within the ITIs. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with ITI managers and coordinators, focus groups with academic staff and students,

⁷ Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.

⁸ Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. L. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

and participant observation of selected ITI activities, such as research events, training programmes, and coordination meetings. Interviews and focus groups will explore participants' experiences of interdisciplinary collaboration, including governance arrangements, funding and evaluation conditions, integration of research and teaching, and perceived barriers and enabling factors. All qualitative data collected in this work package will be analysed using Grounded Theory⁹ methods, allowing key themes and patterns in ITD institutionalisation to emerge from the data.

Objective 2, Work Package 3: Synthesis and recommendations

Work package 3 integrates the findings from Work Packages 1 and 2 to generate new knowledge on how ITD research and training are developed within the ITIs and to translate these insights into good practices, and policy-relevant recommendations for the university. It is structured around four tasks.

Task 3.1 brings together the results from the document analysis, surveys, interviews, focus groups, and participant observations conducted in the previous work packages. Each ITI will first be analysed individually using Grounded Theory, guided by four dimensions of institutionalization: epistemic, organisational, cultural, and strategic.¹⁰ Finally, findings from the institutional context analysis (WP1) will be compared with observations of institutional practices (WP2) to identify where formal structures align with everyday practices.

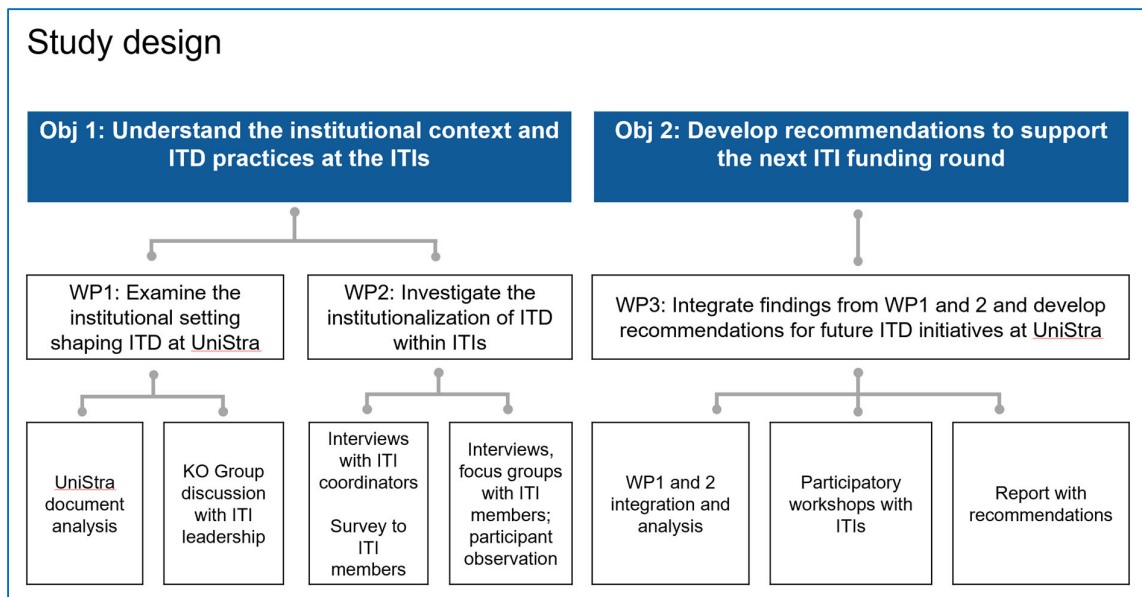
The preliminary findings and proposed indicators will be discussed in two participatory workshops in **Task 3.2**. One workshop will involve the Vice-President and the university project management team responsible for the overall coordination of the ITIs, while the second workshop will bring together ITI coordinators. These discussions will allow participants to reflect on the findings, validate interpretations, and refine the proposed best practices and indicators.

The final **Task 3.3** focuses on translating the project results into recommendations for institutional decision-making. A final report will synthesise the findings from all work packages and present evidence-based recommendations for supporting ITD research and training at the University of Strasbourg. In addition, briefs highlighting good practices and common challenges will be prepared specifically for the ITIs to support reflection and future development.

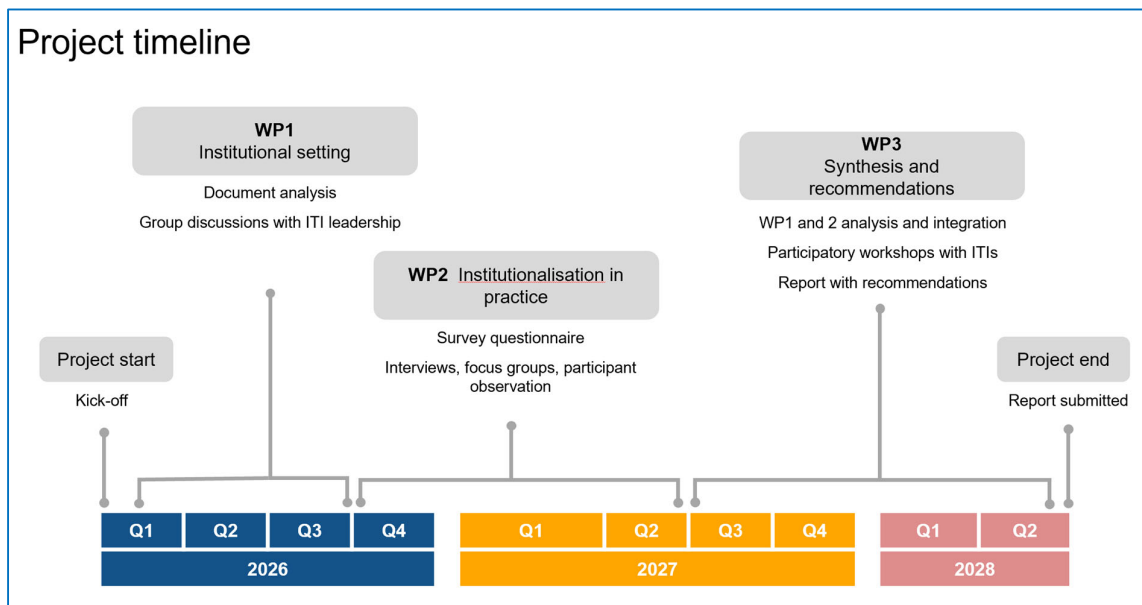
⁹ Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.

¹⁰ Vienni-Baptista, B., & Klein, J. T. (Eds.). (2022). *Conclusion: A framework for institutionalizing inter- and trans-disciplinary research and teaching in higher education*. In B. Vienni-Baptista & J. T. Klein (Eds.), *Institutionalizing interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity: Collaboration across cultures and communities* (pp. 232–248). Routledge.

Study design



Project timeline



Expected outcomes

The project will generate new insights into how interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research and training are organised and supported within universities. By analysing the experience of the ITIs, it will contribute to research on how initiatives like these are created, embedded, and sustained within institutional structures.

Several outputs will be produced, including a report summarising the main findings and recommendations for the University of Strasbourg, briefs highlighting good practices and common challenges in interdisciplinary research and training across the ITIs, and a scientific publication analysing the ITI initiative and its role in supporting interdisciplinary work.

At the same time, the findings will have practical relevance for the University of Strasbourg. The results will provide an evidence-based overview of the institutional conditions, challenges,

and enabling factors that influence the ITIs. This analysis will inform discussions within the university as it prepares for the next funding round of ITIs and will help identify ways to strengthen support for interdisciplinary research and training in the future.

Relevance for the ITIs

What this project could mean for the ITIs

The project aims to create a clearer picture of how interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work currently unfolds across the ITIs. By bringing together experiences from different institutes, it will help make existing practices more visible and create space to reflect on how ITD research and training are organised in different contexts.

Through the study, ITI members will have the opportunity to share their experiences and discuss approaches across disciplines, organisational models, and funding timelines. This can help surface common challenges, highlight effective practices, and better understand how institutional conditions, including governance structures, funding arrangements, and evaluation systems, shape everyday ITD work.

The connection between strategic ambitions around ITD connect and daily practices within the institutes will also be considered. Identifying where these align, and where tensions or gaps may exist, can contribute to more informed discussions about how ITD initiatives are supported in the future. The findings will be synthesised in a report for the University of Strasbourg and short briefs for the ITIs, highlighting lessons learned and practical insights that may support future development.

What the project does not aim to do

This project is not an evaluation of individual researchers or teams. The focus is on institutional structures and experiences, not on assessing personal performance. It is also not a ranking or comparison of the ITIs. Differences across institutes are expected and valuable, as they help illustrate how ITD initiatives develop in different disciplinary and organisational environments.

Participation in the project is not linked to current funding decisions, and taking part will not influence existing funding allocations. Finally, all information shared during the study is treated as confidential. Contributions will not be identifiable in reports or publications, and results will be presented in aggregated form. The project is conducted under formal collaboration and data-use agreements and follows approved ethical procedures, described below.

Ethical considerations

Agreements establishing the collaboration and data management and confidentiality are in place between ETH Zürich and the University of Strasbourg (Collaboration Agreement, ETH ID030567; Data Transfer and Use Agreement). The following considerations have been approved by the ETH Zurich Ethics Commission under Project 26 ETHICS-060 and are in process by the University Strasbourg.

All data will be anonymised and stored in the Transdisciplinary Lab, ETH Zurich server, and classified as CONFIDENTIAL (Directive on Information Security, ETH Zurich, November 2021). The team follows guidelines from the Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) regarding metadata and confidential data standards for the social sciences, as indicated by the Research Data Management and Digital Curation office from the ETH Library.

Ethical practice in the qualitative methods will be assured by following guidelines from the European Commission¹¹, the Swiss Anthropological Association, and the ETH Zurich Ethics Commission. All data will be anonymized in line with the Swiss Federal Act on Data Protection (Federal Data Protection and Information Commissioner (FDPIC)).

Metadata will be tagged in XML using the Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) format. The research team will check weekly (during the field season, monthly otherwise) to assure data is being properly processed, documented, and stored.

Informed consent procedures will be put in place (see Annex 1) and personal/sensitive data will be anonymized. Access to personal/sensitive data will be restricted to the members of the team under the supervision of the PI. Sensitive data transfers will be end-to-end encrypted. Sensitive data will be accessible only by authorized participants to the project, managed by the PI.

All servers are located in the ETH Zurich data centre with restricted access. No data will be stored on a public cloud or cloud hosted outside Switzerland. No sensitive/personal data will be stored in cloud service external to ETH Zurich.

Protective measures will be taken regarding the transfer of data and sharing of data between team members. The level of data availability risk is low as all team members will work together in the same work-place (ETH Zurich) and weekly meetings will assure that all steps are taken into consideration for data management. Access to the data/database will be logged, thus each access is traceable.

Access to offices is restricted to authorized persons. The list of authorized persons will be managed by the PI. All datasets will be uploaded in ETH's own Research Collection repository to ensure full compliance with ETH regulations.

¹¹ Iphofen, R. (2013). Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology. European Commission. Retrieved from: http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/hi/ethics-guide-ethnog-anthrop_en.pdf

Contact information

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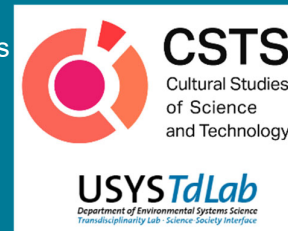
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<https://csts.ethz.ch/research/PATHWAYS.html>



Annex 1: Consent Form



Information and consent form for participants

Investigating institutional pathways for inter- and transdisciplinarity (PATHWAYS)

Place and time: TdLab, Universitätstrasse 16, CHN K 78,
February 2026

Contact person if you have any questions: Madalina Müntz, Senior Scientific Assistant,
mmuentz@ethz.ch

PD Dr. Bianca Vienni-Baptista, Privatdozentin,
bianca.vienni@usys.ethz.ch

Data Protection Officer ETH Zurich: Tomislav Mitar (tomislav.mitar@sl.ethz.ch)

We would like to ask you if you are willing to participate in our research project. Your participation is voluntary. Please read the text below carefully and ask the conducting person about anything you do not understand or would like to know.

What is investigated and how?

This study examines how inter- and transdisciplinary research and teaching are organised and supported at the University of Strasbourg. The University has invested in initiatives that bring together different academic disciplines and involve non-academic partners to address complex societal challenges. The aim of this project is to better understand these initiatives and to identify ways to strengthen institutional support for future inter- and transdisciplinary research and education.

The project applies qualitative research methods, including interviews, focus groups, workshops, and observations of research or teaching activities, as well as a review of relevant institutional documents. There are no experimental interventions, control groups, blinding procedures, or deception involved.

The findings will be used to develop evidence-based recommendations to inform future policies and strategies, and support structures for inter- and transdisciplinary research and teaching at the University of Strasbourg.

It is important to note that the study focuses on institutional processes and experiences, and does not assess individual performance.

Who can participate?

Participation is open to University of Strasbourg academic and professional staff, students and affiliated partners in inter- or transdisciplinary research, teaching, or coordination activities at the University.

What am I supposed to do as a participant?

As a participant, you may be invited to take part in one or more of the following activities: interviews, focus groups, workshops, survey questionnaire or observed research, training, or teaching activities related to inter- and transdisciplinary initiatives at the University of Strasbourg.

Some participants may be involved in more than one phase of the project, such as interviews and focus groups, where preliminary findings are discussed and refined. The format and duration of each activity will be communicated in advance.

What are my rights during participation?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can withdraw your participation at any time without giving reasons and without any disadvantage.

You may pause or stop your participation or decline to answer specific questions at any time.

What risks and benefits can I expect?

There are no foreseeable physical or psychological risks associated with participation. There will be no direct benefit to you. However, your participation may help improve understanding of how inter- and transdisciplinary research and education can be supported at the University of Strasbourg. Risks related to the processing of personal data are minimised through strict data protection and anonymisation procedures.

Will I be compensated for my participation?

No compensation or incentives are provided for participation in this study.

What data is collected from me and how is it used?

The following data may be collected:

- Identifying data: name, institutional role, contact details, and audio recordings (where applicable)
- Research data: interview or focus group content, workshop contributions, and observation notes

These data are collected solely for the purpose of conducting and analysing this research project.

Identifying data are stored separately from research data and are accessible only to the research team. All data are stored securely on ETH Zurich servers located in Switzerland. Identifying data will be deleted or irreversibly anonymised as soon as the purpose of data processing permits.

All data will be anonymised as early as possible. Anonymised data may be published for further use (e.g. in a scientific data repository).

No identifiable data will be shared with third parties. Aggregated and anonymised results will be shared with the University of Strasbourg. There are no industry partners involved in this study.

Who is funding the study?

This project is funded by the University of Strasbourg, supported by the SFRI-STRAT'US project (ANR-20-SFRI-0012) under the framework of France 2030.

Is any damage to health insured?

Damage related to the study is covered by ETH Zurich's public liability insurance (Basler Versicherungen, policy no. 30/4.078.362).

Who reviewed the study?

This study is approved by the ETH Zurich Ethics Committee under application number 26 ETHICS-060.

Complaints office

The secretariat of the ETH Zurich Ethics Committee is available to help you with complaints in connection with your participation in the study. Contact: ethics@sl.ethz.ch or 0041 44 632 85 72.

Consent Form

I, the participant, confirm by my signature that:

- I have read and understood the study information.
- I had enough time to decide about my participation and am taking part in the study voluntarily.
- I fulfil the stated conditions for participation.
- I consent that the data described above may be collected from me and used as described.
- I know that the data collected from me may be published in anonymised form.
- I know that I can cancel my participation any time.

I would like to be informed about the results of this study

- Yes, name, phone number or e-mail:
- No

Name of participant:

Place, date

Signature participant

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Place, date

Signature conducting person

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