

**CHALLENGING
FUTURE
GENERATIONS**



CENTRE FOR UNUSUAL COLLABORATIONS

Yearly Report 2022

The Centre for Unusual Collaborations aims

to create a space that will support an interdisciplinary group of diverse young researchers to come together in unusual collaborations to address the most pressing challenges of the age.

2022 at a glance

The Centre for Unusual Collaborations was in full steam in 2022! CUCo's name is spreading quickly within and beyond the alliance, and met with enthusiasm.

- The Spark and Unusual Collaborations granting schemes saw revisioning to increase their innovative nature, including the conduct of a lottery to decide on research funding.
- Spark was reformed into a learning journey, kicking off with a training programme on competences for interdisciplinary research. The training was developed by CUCo and offered to a group of early and mid career academics and meets great demand, also outside the alliance; it is clearly filling a gap.
- A set of truly unexpected interdisciplinary research ideas and projects were funded and ongoing projects are starting to show results and lessons are captured also from teams that end their work.
- A range of fun, provocative and engaging events were organised and positively evaluated.
- And lastly, the CUCo Board shifted its composition: new members were installed and others stepped down, and the CUCo team was elaborated with a tentacular junior policy officer, a Knowledge & Learning Adviser (to systematise learning in CUCo) and the EWUU event manager also has some time to spend for CUCo.

This yearly report offers the specific achievements in 2022 for:

1. CUCo support to unusual research teams
2. Events and outreach
3. CUCo Board and team

1. CUCo-support to unusual research teams

CUCo support to unusual research teams in numbers:

- 1.1M Euro spent on unexpected, original, interdisciplinary, enthusiastic research teams.
- 1 lottery to decide on research funding.
- 4 new Spark teams kicked off, 6 ongoing Spark teams concluded their activities
- 6 Unusual Collaborations started their work in early 2022, 7 Unusual Collaborations were funded at the end of 2022– ranging from a focus on chronic pain, to water security, to games for interdisciplinary collaborations.
- 48 early and mid-career academics involved through Spark and 52 through Unusual Collaborations (UCo).
- 1 joint UCo kick-off meeting, 1 joint UCo midterm meeting, 6 UCo midterm conversations.
- 1 experiment conducted at Betweter Festival by the Structures of Strength project.
- 1 fieldtrip visiting key stakeholders in the water domain by the All in the Same Boat team.
- 1 Meeting with representatives of all Recognition and Reward workgroups to discuss assessment of interdisciplinarity, inclusion and diversity and team work.
- Numerous twinkling eyes over the freedom to collaborate in new ways and new friendships formed.

CUCo way of working

- 1 brand-new training programme for interdisciplinary research competences kicked off.
- 1 CUCo toolkit made available online to support the collaborative interdisciplinary research process, including 1 pool of process coaches.
- 1 expert team kicked off a scoping study on transdisciplinarity.

Key insight on unusual research

Unusual research collaborations require competences and skills that researchers do not necessarily already have. And that may even counter the general attitude that academics are trained for: practising disciplinary humility instead of offering siloed disciplinary perspectives, engaging in open dialogue instead of debate, paying greater attention to process instead of focusing mainly on topic, investing in team collaboration instead of privileging focus on individual achievements and output, engaging in iterative research design instead of starting with a predefined research question and approach.

More training needs to be offered to early and mid-career academics to work in inter- and trans-disciplinary collaborations. CUCo has started with this; the demand is significant.

Spark grants

Two new Spark teams emerged from the symposium in February that was the last in its form:

- **Better Waive than Worry, An exploration of tools, strategies and cultures of early detection across various contexts**
- **Tackling Future Workforce Challenges**

The granting schemes contribute to the following objectives of the alliance:

Joint Research

By 2025 young researchers from the alliance partners working at the Centre for Unusual Collaborations have initiated innovative, interdisciplinary research projects.

Community

By 2025 a lively community of researchers and lecturers will have emerged who know how to find each other across the boundaries of institutions and disciplines.

Revised Spark setup

The Spark grants scheme has been revised in 2022, for two reasons:

1. We noticed that there was reduced interest in pitching ideas at the Spark symposia, which had been originally set up to help researchers interested in applying for a Spark grant finding team members from other disciplines and institutions. Finding research team members with whom to develop unusual collaborations is not easy, and experience teaches us that it takes time and effort to build creative, fruitful and joyous interdisciplinary collaborations;
2. The complexity of interdisciplinary research requires the awareness and use of a specific set of competences for which not all academics are optimally prepared. As such, we have re-envisioned the Spark grant as an individual and collective interdisciplinary learning journey designed to better equip CU Co-supported research teams to take up the challenge of unusual collaborations.

Spark learning journey

The result is a two-phase co-learning journey called 'Spark', which sets off twice a year:

- **Spark phase 1- Developing interdisciplinary research competences and finding research team members.** This first step in the learning journey comprises four half-day workshops that serve the dual purpose of i. developing interdisciplinary research competences, and ii. connecting researchers with one another as potential Spark collaborators.
- **Spark phase 2 - Assembling a team and developing a research topic.** After completing the four half-day workshops, a set of (at least) two participants that found an interesting connection with each other will enter Spark phase 2. They will assemble a team from across the EWUU alliance institutes covering different disciplines to further explore a project idea. This team should meet the eligibility criteria for diversity of team, unusual approach to the collaborative process and the interdisciplinary learning approach.

The first run of Spark phase 1 resulted in two new Spark teams that are committed to working together in unusual collaborations, with a very diverse set of team members.

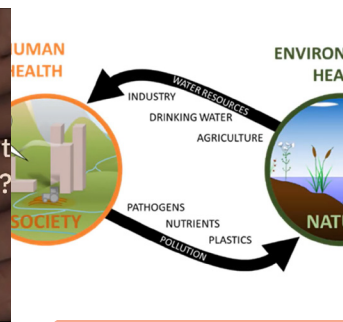
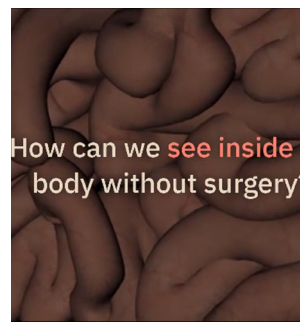
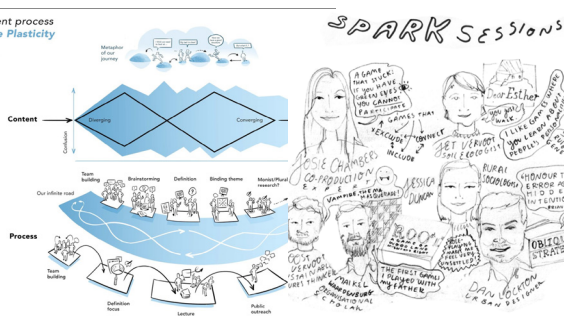
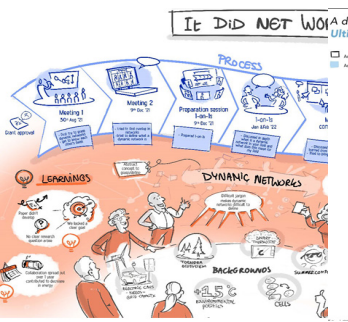
The training as future CUCo business model

The training hits a mark, as we have received a multitude of requests to conduct the training elsewhere, within and beyond the alliance. We will run it in 2023 for the other alliance initiatives and for the Young Academy Groningen (as a paid assignment). Due to limited capacity we cannot approve all requests; this is potentially a future business model for CUCo.

Finalised Spark teams

Six teams concluded their activities and offer their lessons and results. [Please see their reports and videos:](#)

- All in the Same Boat: Unusual Solutions for Cleaner Water
- The FAIR-Battery Challenge
- Unusual Perspectives on Dynamic Networks: Building Interdisciplinary Understanding
- Smart Origami Metamaterials for Diagnosis and Treatment of Gastrointestinal Diseases
- The Ultimate Plasticity
- Game Your Way Through: Games as a Method for Transformative Collaborations



Highlight

“It did not work”, this was the final conclusion of the Spark adventure of the ‘Unusual Perspectives on Dynamic Networks’ team. After having explored dynamic networks across scales and perspectives for a year, the interdisciplinary team decided not to push this idea forward. This fits CU-Co’s approach to exploring teams and ideas: they may proceed, but they may just as well end.

Lessons first run phase 1

In September we ran Spark phase 1, which was positively evaluated. We gathered three main lessons, that are available in more detail;

1. Unusual collaborations require an open mind to outcome and a commitment to process
2. Creative and embodied exercises release energy and deepen learning
3. Finding common ground is not about meeting in the middle

Unusual Collaborations Grants

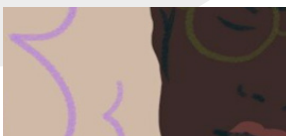


Six Unusual Collaborations (UCo) projects started or continued their activities in early March and, at the end of 2022, the decision was made for the funding for 2023 through a lottery.

The six Unusual Collaborations, on the project pages reporting and results of each are available:



[All in the Same Boat](#): Securing water from raindrop to tap



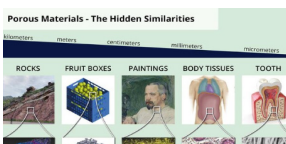
[Defeating Chronic Pain](#)



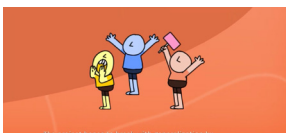
[The FAIR Battery Challenge](#): Removing barriers to knowledge diffusion



[Playing with the Trouble](#): Games as a method for transformative collaborations



[Structures of Strength](#): Unusual Collaborations on Porous Materials; a solution for health, food, and environmental changes



[The Power of One](#): Towards the Representation of Unheard and Unseen Individuals in the Hospital, Workplace and Neighbourhood

Some highlights

The All in the Same Boat team made a fieldtrip along three key stakeholders in the water domain in The Netherlands. See the video that captures this experience.

The Structures of Strength team performed experiments with porous materials to a large audience at Betweter Festival, see video.

The Chronic Pain team developed new pain phenotypes by analysing datasets in unusual ways. See video on results of the first year.

Increased CUCo support in 2022



- For the first time, all six teams convened in a kick-off meeting as well as a mid-term meeting, to identify from the start linkages between the projects, particularly on collaborations. CUCo wishes to capture lessons, methods and tools used to improve interdisciplinary collaboration from the UCo teams, in order to make these lessons available for other ongoing as well as future teams.
- A pool of process coaches is made available for UCo (and Spark) teams to support the collaborative interdisciplinary research process. A key lesson is the need to focus on the process all throughout the research process and to build in reflection.
- A CUCo toolkit is made available online, offering tools, methods, approaches as well as facilitators that can support the collaborative process. The kit is filled with what we learned over the last two years and will be continuously updated.
- A Knowledge and Learning Advisor was added to the CUCo team, in order to systematise learning about unusual collaborations and the sharing of those lessons.
- The Board members that initiated CUCo have collectively written a scientific publication about the experience, barriers that were encountered, as well as lessons learned.

Challenges and recommendations for improvement

Unusual research collaborations require competences and skills that researchers do not necessarily already have. And that may even counter the general attitude that academics are trained for. See key insight textbox before.

- **Recommendation:** More training needs to be offered to early and mid-career academics to work in inter- and trans-disciplinary collaborations. CUCo has started with this; the demand is significant.

Young academics in CUCo-funded projects continue to find it difficult to free up time and space, even though the budget is provided. The nature of interdisciplinary research is that substantial time is needed for reflection on the process (50% of effort!), which does not deliver immediate output.

- **Recommendation:** More and quicker progress on Recognition & Rewards schemes is needed that acknowledges the specifics of interdisciplinary research and its processes. CUCo plays a role in the coordination of this, but increased insights and capacities are needed at the middle management level in the institutes.

Very limited follow-up funding is available for the research that emerges through CUCo: most funding schemes are more disciplinarily oriented or, when they are asking for unusual collaborations, they are hugely time-intensive and offer low granting percentages.

- **Recommendation:** Increase lobby with NWO, ERC, the Ministry of Science and Education etc. to increase funding mechanisms for these types of research, including support for research teams on competence-building and how to design good collaborative research processes. CUCo will continue its efforts on this, but calls on the alliance Board to join in.

2. Events and Outreach

Events and outreach in numbers:

- 13 well-attended events that stirred debate and increased understanding through offering creative topics and formats.
- Around 500 participants that engaged actively and built new research teams with each other, that strengthened skills such as public speaking and the artistic mindset and that explored topics that ranged from failure to novel research communication and interdisciplinary research methods.
- Approximately 25 musical instruments played, two mythical figures designed into being and innumerable amounts of failures that were released from chests.
- 1 article on CUCo in the TU/e newsletter, 1 newly inspired failure column in WUR Resource, 1 CUCo keynote,
- 1 CUCo community space secured at TU/e in the Disruptor building
- 1 academic article on lessons from the first two CUCo years submitted to Nature Careers
- 2 rooms full of participants dancing the CUCo octopus dance during the opening of the academic year!
- 72 haikus written by participants across 3 institutes about what CUCo offers during its collective manifesto writing...

Starting points for CUCo events

- Unusual set-up** CUCo events are characterised by their potential to stir up debate, as well as by their contribution to understanding unusual interdisciplinary research. Not only are the topics unconventional but the formats used are equally surprising: arts-based, creative, embodied and experiential.
- Quality over quantity** Participant numbers have little meaning to us. The experience that the participants have gone through all the more, as well as whether new insights and perspectives were encountered. We happily host intimate events for small groups that offer meaningful exchanges.
- Open platform** Our events are organised by whoever is enthusiastic; at times, this is by our own team and other times by external parties that love CUCo. The same goes for speakers: we find fascinating people all through the alliance and fascinating people find us.

All CUCo events that were organised in 2022 contributed to the following objective of the alliance:

By 2025 a lively community of researchers and lecturers will have emerged who know how to find each other across the boundaries of institutions and disciplines.

CUCo Events in 2022



When	What	Who	Why Key message
Jan.	Online training in four morning sessions - Speak like Obama	Offered by 'De-batacademie' to ~15 participants	To give a speech is an art. This training offered a set of key rhetorical techniques to a group of young academics, to be able to present their research well and clear
Feb.	Online workshop - The methodological quest: interdisciplinary research methods	Minha Lee (TU/e) and Anke de Vrieze (WUR) presented their experiences with interdisciplinary work with ~20 participants	This session served to i. give context to working with interdisciplinary methods; what needs to be considered in terms of epistemics when working in interdisciplinary ways, and ii. provide examples of (resources for) interdisciplinary research methods to inspire and help teams on their way.
Feb.	Spark symposium	CUCo Board and ~10 potential Spark grant applicants	To bring together ideas and people that do not necessarily meet. Due to declining turnout for the symposia, this was the last of its kind (see below: granting schemes).
Mar.	Online workshop From Life Writing to Design; communicating research	Anna Poletti (UU) and Lenneke Kuijter (TU/e) presented their work to ~25 participants	Showcasing creative manners to reach and engage with the audience of research in unexpected and meaningful ways.
Apr.	CUCo @EWUU conference In plenary	On stage: Dan Lockton (TU/e), Josephine Chambers (UU), Yoeri van de Burgt (TU/e), Sylvia Brugman (WUR) for ~250 participants	The CUCo speakers shared experiences of collaboration across disciplines and institutions within two Unusual Collaborations: Playing with the Trouble; Gaming as a tool in interdisciplinary collaboration Defeating chronic pain
	CUCo hosted a 'Failure Cafe'	CUCo Board and ~30 participants	In this interactive workshop, we shared examples of our own failures whilst seeking to do things differently and welcomed participants to share their (professional) failures and to explore the learning they provided (or not!). This session was a leadup to The Great Failure Festival (see below)
May	Annual CUCo event - The Great Failure Festival	By the CUCo team, in collaboration with Instituut voor Faalkunde, for ~60 participants	At CUCo we aim to create an atmosphere of openness and break the taboo around failures because they are epicentres of learning. However, the current high-pressure academic environment is not supportive of failure. During the Festival we offered support and creative approaches to understanding failure differently. This included video-making, composing a CV of Failure, and an interactive theatre performance.

When	What	Who	Why Key message
June	Workshop Rewards & Recognition	CUCo team and ~15 representatives of the R&R teams in all four alliance institutes, and from Maastricht University	CUCo facilitated an exchange of progress made on Recognition & Rewards across alliance institutes. Although many problems with the current assessment procedures have been identified (lack of diversity in profiles, focus on research output), how to change this system and how to assess less-quantifiable output needs careful deliberation. A pilot conducted at Maastricht University (no criteria used!) inspired the participants to think more unconventionally.
July	In-person workshop New Metaphors game	By Dan Lockton (TU/e) for ~ 10 participants	In this workshop New Metaphors was introduced, a game-like creative method for reframing problems and generating ideas, with a series of activities designed to apply the method to interdisciplinary collaborations and thinking about futures.
Sept.	Online session CUCo@ EWUU Lunch & Learn	CUCo team for ~30 participants	The complexity of interdisciplinary research requires the use of a specific set of competences for which not all academics are optimally prepared. In this Lunch, Learn & Connect we shared some of our key lessons and offered the opportunity to practise the difficult exercise that is called 'perspective-taking'.
Oct.	CUCo @EWUU heidag	CUCo team for ~20 participants	We shared some of our lessons learnt. Key message: working effectively across disciplines is not self-evident and requires more than putting people together in a room. We inspired the EWUU initiatives to start thinking about process (and team), in addition to theme/research focus. We offered how CUCo can support in this: through training and tools.
Nov.	In-person workshop: Embracing multiperspectivity	Hannie van den Bergh (Studio HB) and Louise Wipfler (WUR) for ~10 participants	What can we learn from artists in our daily struggle when collaborating with others? How do artists use their senses, give meaning to emotions & feelings and collaborate with their material and others? In this workshop we dug into the world of collaboration while stepping into the artists mindset.
Nov. - Dec.	CUCo roadshow @ Young Academies	CUCo team	The CUCo team visited the Young Academies of all four alliance institutes, to re-engage with their members and spark enthusiasm.
Dec.	Two in-person sessions: CUCo Manifesto writing (In Utrecht and Wageningen)	CUCo team for 2 x ~10 participants	CUCo is writing its manifesto. A manifesto captures the essence of what an initiative does and seeks to do, who and what it involves, and how. And it should represent the community involved in the initiative, not only the voices of a few.

Outreach



CUCo received attention via the following platforms:

- The Great Failure Festival inspired WUR Resource to include a failure column.
- Article, TU/e website: “Within CUCo, research may fail, as long as it is unusual and educational”.
- UU Dies Natalis, themed Curious Collaborations: CUCo board member Martine Veldhuizen highlighted CUCo, which was presented in a brief video.
- WUR Opening of the Academic year: former CUCo Board member Jessica Duncan presented CUCo in her talk and had the audience do the CUCo octopus dance!
- WUR WASS PhD day: Corinne Lamain, CUCo Director, conducted the keynote speech and had the room map themselves physically to showcase differences in researcher positionalities.
- UCo team Structures of Strength set up an experiment as part of the lively Betweter festival.
- CUCo releases a bimonthly newsletter since September.
- CUCo gave a presentation during the UU research funding days and had a poster at the research day at the UMCU .

3. CUCo Board and Support team

CUCo is steered by a Board consisting of representatives of the Young Academies of the alliance institutes. In 2022 the CUCo Board was fully rotated.

Board

Nine original board members have stepped down from the Board, we are deeply grateful for their contributions to CUCo, which leaves a lasting imprint.

Sandra Hofmann, TU/e
Daniël Lakens, TU/e
Daniel Tetteroo, TU/e

Sylvia Brugman, WUR
Jessica Duncan, WUR

Susanne Knittel, UU
Martine Veldhuizen, UU

Marianne Boes, UMCU
Jannie Wijnen, UMCU

Four new Board members were welcomed:

Max Birk, TU/e
Meghann Ormond, WUR
Pooyan Tamimi Arab, UU
Inge Stegeman, UMCU



Reducing the number of board members makes the team more agile in terms of agendas. Conversations are ongoing on aligning the needs of the CUCo community with the roles of Board and support team. To this end, we conducted the manifesto writing exercise and have dedicated sessions to give shape to the future of CUCo. The founding CUCo board members have indicated wanting to stay involved as ambassadors and sounding board to ensure continuation of the CUCo spirit.

Support Team

Three new support team members joined CUCo:

- Caspar Schoevaars joined the team as tentacular junior policy officer (0,8 fte)
- Anke de Vrieze was welcomed, in the position of Knowledge & Learning Adviser (0, 6 fte)
- Helma van Luttikhuizen was welcomed as EWUU event manager (0,2 fte for CUCo)

Challenges

There is huge interest in the funding schemes as well as support offered by CUCo whilst the limited capacity of the support team hinders the ability to respond to clearly articulated needs from the CUCo community, such as offering training to a wider group and offering more continued support for teams that are well underway with their efforts. The extension of the team helps to address this better and a trajectory to 'train the trainers' will be setup in 2023, so that CUCo can serve as a training center more broadly and can turn this into a business model.

Embeddedness of the alliance in different institutes that are in turn subdivided into departments: complexity of coordinating administrative tasks remained also in 2022 and is a burden and is going at the cost of enthusiasm for participating in CUCo.

To Conclude.... Some CUCo inspiration!

Some of the haikus that were written by the CUCo community, during a series of events aimed at writing a 'CUCo manifesto'.



Motivated is
To remain conversing
After proven wrong

Are you scientist or
Human? Show me your fear and
Let's face the unknown.

Problems are complex
Holisticity is key
Interdisciplinary: many views become one

Perspective. Yours. Mine.
Let us journey together
To find our blind spots

An experiment
Fails or succeeds no matter
Trying is the reward

Powerful octo
Break down the walls of prison
Empower the playground

In the beginning
Potential without a cause
Untapped excitement

To share the problem
Is the first stepping stone to
Collaboration