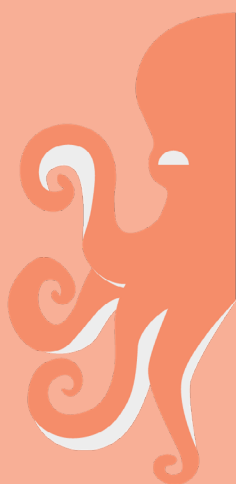


**CHALLENGING  
FUTURE  
GENERATIONS**



**CENTRE FOR  
UNUSUAL  
COLLABORATIONS**

**YEARLY REPORT  
EWUU 2021**

## PROGRESS CENTRE FOR UNUSUAL COLLABORATIONS 2021

### LOOKING BACK

2021 was an eventful year for the Centre for Unusual Collaborations (CUCo): it was met across the alliance and beyond with great enthusiasm about its aims and activities. Also, initial efforts started to pay off - the first funded projects started their activities and the physical centre was opened. A new call for proposals was launched and a range of well visited events were successfully organised. CUCo has taken off! The next phase will be focused on consolidation and increased support towards the funded projects for facilitating the process of collaboration. In terms of staff, it was realised that dedicated time investment was needed for overall coordination, leading to the hiring of a Director. This releases the overburdened CUCo Board members and allows them to focus on guidance and steering.

### AIM OF THE CENTRE FOR UNUSUAL COLLABORATIONS

*“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.”*

### MILESTONES, INSIGHTS, CHALLENGES

*The work of the Centre for Unusual Collaborations is organised along three pillars, for each of which progress is provided.*



#### THE MEADOW

**Aim:**  
To feed the debate on unusual collaborations and create a community around it



#### THE BEEHIVE

**Aim:**  
to practice, learn from and enhance understanding of unusual collaborations in research



#### THE TERMITE HILL

**Aim:**  
to address the barriers in the institutional, regulatory, policy and social context of CUCo, in order to increase and embed the space for unusual inter- and transdisciplinary research collaborations

# MILESTONES, INSIGHTS, CHALLENGES



## THE MEADOW



## MILESTONES

- **Launch of the physical Centre**, named as CUCo's Nest! Celebrated with a launch event, bringing together 60 participants focusing on unusual thinking and research
- **Three** symposia, attended by 40+ participants on average seeking unusual partnerships
- **Three** networking events, attended by 30+ participants on average
- **One** training in rhetoric skills, with 23 participants
- **One** invited presentation at the Innovation events of FIRJAN, Brazil
- The [CUCo website](#) was launched! Including overviews of all SPARK and UCo projects.
- [Media attention](#): CUCo is covered in national newspapers

## INSIGHTS

**Target group:** we reach the young researchers that already have an interest in and intrinsic motivation for **i.** unusual inter- and transdisciplinary research, or **ii.** that are open to learning more about it. We do not reach **iii.** those that have already worked for a long time in interdisciplinary research or **iv.** those that are primarily interested in focusing on their own field. We have decided to focus on reaching the first group and enlarging the second group. We are not of the opinion that all researchers need to work in unusual collaborations.

CUCo's name and activities invoke a **positive response** within and beyond the alliance institutes: it struck a chord. There is great enthusiasm to organize and be part of events at CUCo's Nest. This underlines the felt need for more space for young researchers to choose to do things differently. To collaborate unusually and broaden their scope.

- Organising energising events in Covid-times
- Reaching potential audiences with still limited awareness of the alliance
- Maintaining active engagement over the longer-term (especially during pandemic conditions)

## CHALLENGES

# MILESTONES, INSIGHTS, CHALLENGES



## THE BEEHIVE

- **Eight** new, highly interdisciplinary teams were kickstarted through SPARK grants
- **Four** unconventional and innovative research projects were funded through the Unusual Collaborations (UCo) grants
- **85** researchers across a multitude of disciplines engaged in unusual collaborations in SPARK and UCo teams
- **One** innovative call for proposals for the Unusual Collaborations grants was launched: through an assessment procedure that includes peer feedback and peer review the call aims to build the UCo community from its very inception

## MILESTONES

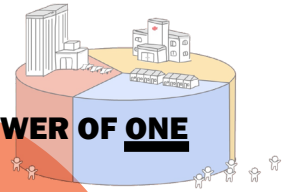
## EXAMPLES OF RUNNING PROJECTS



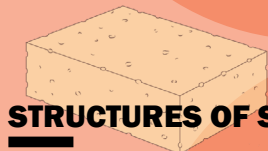
### IMAGINING MORE THAN HUMAN COMMUNITIES

We are a group of unusual collaborators from Utrecht, Wageningen and Eindhoven all working on the relationship between humans and other animals in society and culture. Within our various fields and disciplines, we are all committed to making our research and practice less anthropocentric. Thus, in this unusual collaboration, we have set ourselves the goal of working together to imagine what a more equitable community of humans and nonhumans might look like.

### THE POWER OF ONE



Current approaches to addressing the medical, financial and work-related problems of individuals in groups often fail to actually help them. Researchers and professionals focus on what they perceive as the average individual, which prevents them from recognizing those who (partly) fall outside their scope. These unseen people typically suffer from an intersecting complexity of social problems, ailments, or belonging to marginalized groups. We want to see the unseen and hear the unheard – people currently not included in abstract categories, datasets, or algorithms.



### STRUCTURES OF STRENGTH

In SoS, we create a platform where a team of researchers from diverse fields such as biology, medicine, culture, history, engineering and mathematics learn from each other and work together in order to combine their knowledge and create veritable solutions related to health, food, energy, cultural and environmental issues.

### THE FAIR-BATTERY CHALLENGE



In this project, we aim to create a FAIR-Battery (FAIR = Findable + Accessible + Interoperable + Reproducible). We seek to present an open-hardware platform for a versatile battery technology and make the platform radically accessible: 1- by deliberately using low cost and locally available materials suitable for local user groups, and 2- by setting up the education communities on top of the open-hardware design.

## MILESTONES, INSIGHTS, CHALLENGES



### THE BEEHIVE

### INSIGHTS

- There is great enthusiasm for **collaboration rather than competition** amongst CU Co grantees and beyond
- The **main incentive** to work in CU Co funded projects is intrinsic **interest/curiosity**
- The system in which (young) researchers operate is not supportive of CU Co funded research:
  - even though funding is provided, time is not made available for their work in CU Co projects, rather they need to do it on top of everything else
  - there is not always recognition for work in CU Co projects: it is then counted as 'outreach' rather than academic work
- There is an expressed need for more support to funded teams on the **process of collaboration**, such as development of skills and competencies for conducting interdisciplinary research (communication, methodologies, disciplinary grounding,. etc), facilitation, coaching
- Time and space is needed during the SPARK phase for **exploration**: a research idea is the final stage, not its starting point
- There is opportunity for **increased cross-learning** across SPARK and UCo grantees on the process of collaboration
- Different methods are used to facilitate the collaboration across disciplinary boundaries: visual tools, games, role playing.
- It merits to **first focus on interdisciplinary research**, develop our knowledge and skills in that domain. We will move on to also supporting **transdisciplinary collaborations** in the years to come. Societal challenges that might be solved by getting a diverse group of academics and societal partners together to tackle issues. These issues might not be the very high end sophisticated academic problems, but might be things that will make a difference in society.
- **Division of labour** is necessary to avoid researchers needing to use their creative and scarce time to do administrative work. There is a need to allow for support staff in the project budgets, e.g. student assistants.

### CHALLENGES

- Young researchers in CU Co-funded projects find it **difficult to free up time and space**, even though budget is provided
- **Recognition and rewards**: time spent on CU Co projects is often considered as outreach instead of research. Collaborations take time, output follows later (and not all positive output is easily measured in the short term). We have agreed with Henk Kummeling to team up with the alliance Board to coordinate recognition and rewards across the alliance institutes.
- **One-year financial cycles** for funding projects discourages young researchers to participate
- Embeddedness of the alliance in different institutes that are in turn subdivided into departments: **complexity of coordinating administrative tasks** is a burden and is going at the cost of enthusiasm for participating in CU Co.

## MILESTONES, INSIGHTS, CHALLENGES



### THE TERMITE HILL



### MILESTONES

- CUCo presentation and attendance during the alliance **General Assembly** meeting
- A **partnership with NWO** has started: the NWA/KIC department and CUCo will collaborate on supporting interdisciplinary research teams with training and tools
- **Collaboration with the alliance Working Group Education** started

### INSIGHTS

- CUCo should aim to get an embedded place in the Dutch (and later international) research landscape, by ensuring support by VSNU/NWO/EU/OCW or others
- There are other, likeminded initiatives in NL, EU, and around the world. It would make sense to connect and team up.

### CHALLENGES

Efforts related to **Rewards and Recognition are not streamlined across the alliance**: UU is ahead of TU/e and WUR. This inhibits researchers from spending time with/on CUCo. We are keen to play a role in the coordination of RR efforts across the alliance and offer to involve RR teams and managers in all we do at CUCo to let them experience the benefits

There is at present a limited offering of **career paths that offer a balance between expertise on content and openness to ideas outside of one's own bubble**. There is a need for generalists as well as content experts; we offer the alliance Board to play a role in conceptualising as well as implementing such different types of career paths.

# MILESTONES, INSIGHTS, CHALLENGES

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## ALLIANCE AND CENTRAL ORGANISATION

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The alliance has started off with **great autonomy** for all working groups, which is **deeply appreciated** by the CU Co Board and team. Although we would appreciate improved alignment of support structures and systems as outlined below and in the memo with the other working groups, we call on the alliance Board to continue providing us with this autonomous space. It **demonstrates the trust we are given**, which encourages us to improve ourselves and reach even higher with our ambitions.

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## MILESTONES

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- Great enthusiasm to collaborate among the alliance partners
- The central organization is very willing to make a success of the alliance and flexible towards proposals for organisation and content
- The working groups are very helpful to each other, despite different starting points and content

## CHALLENGES/ POINTS OF IMPROVEMENT

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- Working across the institutes is at present highly time consuming due to the lack of centralised systems. Finances and IT systems are not aligned, making support tasks difficult and time intensive. It is essential for the functioning of CU Co that these issues are resolved. It would be of great help if such barriers could be removed.
  - The central team is organized in a lean and mean manner, which has a clear efficiency benefit. The downside is, however, that similar work is done at each working group leads to duplications of efforts and general lack of coherence across working groups. It would be beneficial if the central team could provide support on cross-cutting tasks like finances, communication and writing grant applications.
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**ACTIVITIES IN  
2022 - 2023**

**LOOKING FORWARD**

Our ambition in the years to come is to consolidate the CUCo way of working - to make unusual collaborations usual. We will continue to showcase inspirational examples of unusual thinking and research, we will translate our learnings about the process of collaboration into support for the CUCo community to do so increasingly and we shall increase our engagement with the power structures within and beyond the alliance to increase the space for young researchers to choose for doing the research they wish to do without barriers. A crown on our work this year would be to meet with the new Minister of OCW: Robbert Dijkgraaf.

**CUCo IN THE  
(NEAR) FUTURE**

*A place to connect*

Organisation of unusual networking events and funding for fostering unusual collaborations amongst early and mid-career researchers. Creating a community of practice including ambassadors for unusual thinking and research

*A lab for experiments*

Innovative granting and monitoring schemes, as well as support for project teams, co-designed with the CUCo community. Showcasing and stimulating research on unusual topics, innovative research and education methods and unexpected collaborations.

*A hub to think and act*

Deepening knowledge on how to make unusual collaborations effective, including engagement with societal partners and spin-off projects. Needs-based support for early and mid career researchers to strengthen skills and competencies - trainings, workshops and seminars.

*A centre of excellence*

As part of an ecosystem of like-minded initiatives, aiming to transform the research and education landscape towards more safe and creative collaborations



## SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES ALONG THE THREE PILLARS



### THE MEADOW

- **Monthly events**, online or in CUCo's Nest, in collaboration with CUCo community members. Including sessions on how to reach audiences in unusual ways, on interdisciplinary research methods, on research in collaboration with societal partners. And many more.
- **The Great Failure Festival** in May 2022
- Three **CUCo symposia** are held annually, in which young researchers can pitch new research ideas and meet others to team up with.
- A **tentacular thinking seminar/workshop** with Donna Haraway in the fall
- A **roadshow** along the four alliance institutes, to promote CUCo amongst the early and mid career researchers
- Two **outreach events** in which the funded teams can showcase their lessons and research results
- An exploration of **new organizational models**, such as sociocracy



### THE TERMITE HILL

- Formulation of a CUCo proposition on how to make unusual collaborations an integral element of academia, co-created with budget holders across and beyond the alliance.
- Lobby with key actors in CUCo's system (alliance, OCW, NWO, KNAW, etc) to enable space for young researchers to pursue career paths that integrate working in unusual collaborations.
- Building/joining an ecosystem of like-minded initiatives in order to facilitate Centres of Excellence that result from CUCo funded projects.



### THE BEEHIVE

- A maximum of eight SPARK teams, **exploring unusual research ideas and teams**, will be funded each year through innovative calls for proposals, with three deadlines across the year
- A maximum of six Unusual Collaborations (UCo) teams that work on **innovative, unexpected research** will be funded each year through funding procedures that support building a CUCo community
- **Procedures that stimulate learning and capturing lessons and insights:**
  - Kick-off, midterm and end stage meetings with each funded UCo team
  - Events bringing together funded teams, in order to facilitate cross-learning about unusual thinking and research
  - Facilitation and visual tools for working in interdisciplinary teams and for capturing lessons, provided by [Flatland Agency](#)
- A **training on unusual interdisciplinary research for young researchers and CUCo grantees** will be launched, to be updated based on experiences within the CUCo projects
- An **academic publication** on the experiences and lessons of launching CUCo
- A **submitted grant application** for involving young researchers to study CUCo
- A **CUCo documentary** on the story of new Unusual Collaborations teams, capturing their learning journey as well as results, launched early 2023.
- Support the alliance working groups through **advice and tools for applying the 'CUCo method'**.
- Develop an approach for 'CUCo education' (together with WG Education), for example working towards a CUCo Master's programme and integrating CUCo projects into Challenge Based Learning