



# **CENTRE FOR UNUSUAL COLLABORATIONS**

## **Activities Report 2024**

**Spark Team ‘My Choice Matters’**

*27/03/2025*

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## 1. Introduction

The original goal of the “My Choice Matters” project was to investigate the ways in which tailored modes of communication can empower non-academic target groups to make evidence-informed decisions. Here, specific focus was placed on decisions surrounding societal challenges that aligned with the expertise of the participating researchers, namely climate change, nutrition and animal welfare. Throughout 2023, we worked on operationalizing these aims into a concrete research project. This explorative process included a brief pilot study which led to a UCo proposal for a more elaborate research project towards the end of the year.

Unfortunately, however, we were not able to secure the UCo grant. Luckily, we did receive a handshake grant, which allowed us to continue the project. However, this meant that at the beginning of 2024, we had to take a step back and rethink how we wanted to approach the research project with more limited means. This led to a reduction of the scope of the project, with focus being placed on the more easily accessible target audience of professional (non-academic) staff within Dutch universities. Specifically, research would be aimed at identifying barriers and opportunities for the dissemination of scientific knowledge towards this professional staff. This small research project was conducted in the first half of 2024, being concluded in September.

In the following report we provide a brief description of this research project and other activities carried out within this timeframe. We also provide a brief overview of the main takeaways from the project and provide some future perspectives.

## 2. Activities and outcomes

### 2.1. Professional staff research project

The decision to focus on professional staff within Dutch universities (or all staff without an academic role) was based on two primary motivations. The first of these was that this was a relatively easily accessible target group, which was relevant because we did not have the time or funds to set up an extensive research project. More importantly however, the choice was made for professional staff because they represented an under-researched target audience that could act as “optimal group” of sorts for research dissemination. This reasoning was based on the notion that professional staff are physically close to conducted research, given that they work within the university, and could thus be expected to also have greater interaction with this research.

This led to the following research question: *What are the most important challenges and opportunities regarding the dissemination of scientific knowledge towards professional university staff?*

Data collection for this research took place using qualitative interviews with members of professional staff and an online survey. Participants were recruited using flyers and through email. Whilst the aim was to reach people across all participating universities/institutions (UU, UMC, WUR, TU/e), reaching sufficient participants turned out to be challenging. Here, some hard logistical limitations were also starting to show, as the two student assistants hired to carry out most of the practical parts of the research project (Willem Grooten & Kaja Chmielewska) did not have enough hours available to scale up the recruitment of participants. At the end of the research, 5 interviews were conducted with employees at UU with a further 9 respondents to the survey from a more mixed audience.

This was enough data to provide some interesting insights but was not sufficient to provide any hard scientific results. The main findings were that the primary barrier was the findability of research related events aimed at professional staff, not necessarily the quantity of events that was organised. The participants also indicated that they enjoyed attending open lectures, which we saw as an opportunity to further promote science dissemination towards this target audience if combined with improved findability. Whilst these results are not necessarily representative, we did produce a short report about the project which summarized the research project's methodology and main findings for possible later use.

## **2.2. Poster presentations**

Besides the research activities, members of the team also attended a number of conferences and organized poster presentations. Specifically, these were the ITD conference, the Sig04 conference and the EWUU conference. These poster presentations discussed the contents of the research project but mainly focussed on our experiences and lessons from working within an interdisciplinary team. Focus was placed on these aspects as we found them to be most valuable to external audiences and thought that they could inspire further interdisciplinary collaboration.

## **3. Takeaways and future perspectives**

Looking back, the "My Choice Matters" project provided us with several value lessons and takeaways. Some of these were directly related to the conducted research project. We gained insights into the relationship between professional staff and research activities, which were informative to us even if data was not of sufficient quality to make scientific conclusions. Conducting the interviews also provided great insights into the experiences of professional staff and granted a look into a world that normally is distant in research activities. In this sense, the conducted research project was a learning experience even though we were disappointed that we were not able to produce a formal output.

This being said, the key takeaways from this project were related to the experience of working as an interdisciplinary and cross-institutional team. Here, one of the most important lessons was that compromising on a research topic is not a good strategy to keep everyone engaged. Whilst this might work in collaborations where the research fields of all participants are more closely related, we found that in our case it mostly led to a topic that no one had a particularly strong affinity with. Here, it also did not help that the scope of the research had to be reduced to meet the practical constraints of the research project. The main lesson from this is that striving to compromise on one specific topic, though a logical ambition, might not be the optimal strategy. Instead, it might be better to allow for greater personalization of research activities within a broader research goal. Having experienced this, we aim to improve how we approach this in the continuation of the project.

A secondary set of takeaways was related to how we organized the outputs of the project. Whilst peer reviewed publications and conference presentations remain the gold standard for publishing and communicating research, we found it to be demotivating to work on one large output (i.e. a research paper) for a long time. This became especially apparent when data collection turned out to be insufficient for publication, leading to a lot of effort without a presentable output. In the future, it would be better to plan in multiple smaller outputs throughout the process to keep everyone engaged and motivated. Another important takeaway regarding motivation is making sure at least some in-person meetings occur. Whilst meeting online is very

practical considering the geographic distance between the participants, we found that meeting in person was more inspiring and motivating and led to greater ideas for collaboration than more frequent online meetings. A more decentralized and personalized approach to conducting research would help with this, allowing for less frequent but in-person meetings.

Concluding, whilst 2024 for “My Choice Matters” did not entirely go as hoped, it provided several key takeaways that will surely come in useful in the future, both within the project as outside it. We are excited that we are continuing the project after succeeding at securing UCo funding in the most recent lottery, though we are taking the project in a different direction. We decided to focus on the topic of AI, as it is topical and of shared interest, whilst preserving the themes of trust and empowering non-academic audiences. To do this, we have renamed the project into REL-AI-BLE and will be researching the reliability and perceived (dis)trust in the use of AI in a range of research fields such as climate, health, education and sustainability. In our research design process, we have considered the key takeaways from “My Choice Matters”, aiming to avoid earlier pitfalls. Whilst it is too early to tell if this has been successful, we are excited to turn a new page on this project and continue with valuable interdisciplinary and cross-institutional research into a highly relevant topic.