CLUSTER Steering Committee II 2023
Friday 8th September 2023
Aalto University

Minutes of the meeting / Jules Vanpée
Materials of the meeting / https://CLUSTER.org/intranet/ (Password: Erasmus1999!)

1. Opening of the Meeting and Welcome

The meeting is opened by the CLUSTER Secretary-General Jos Vander Sloten & CLUSTER President Luc Sels at 09:00H. We are welcomed to Aalto University by Vice President of education, Petri Suomala. He elaborates on the history of Aalto University, its current activities and characteristics as well as their long-term goals.

The agenda for the for the Steering Committee II Meeting on the 8th of September 2023 and the minutes of the Steering Committee I of the 30th of March 2023 are approved unanimously. All meeting materials can be found on the CLUSTER website (https://CLUSTER.org/intranet/) (Password: Eramsus1999!).

2. Keynote Presentation on "Multispecies Sustainability in the Classroom: Teaching Transitions to Non-anthropocentric Futures"

Associate Professor of Sustainable Design, İdil Gaziulusoy, presents her keynote on 'Multispecies Sustainability in the Classroom'. The presentation is available on the CLUSTER Intranet.

3. Update working groups
3.1. Associated Partners

Ana Pipio presents an update on the work that was done in the previous months as well as the result of the discussion that was held a day prior. She talks about the different phases of the selection process, including the country votes and the submitted potential partners. The selected countries are South-Korea, Japan and Singapore.

The WG decided to focus on Technological universities rather than comprehensive institutions since this aligns with the focus of the CLUSTER Network. Additionally, the selected institutions will no longer be approach in parallel. Taking into account the preference and information provided by the CLUSTER members, Japan will be contacted first.

Ana Pipio explains that the WG will also restart the iterative process. The CLUSTER members will receive a request to propose new potential countries in other continents. However, based on previous discussions, African countries will not yet be included as potential members at this time.

Finally, Ana Pipio raises the issue regarding the difference between "Full" and "Associated" members. We need to consider the possibility of ending this distinction. This would also means that CLUSTER will change from an European to an international network.

Discussion:
- Luc Sels endorses the shift from a European to a Global network, but warns that the global playfield is a complex one. He advises to first focus on a specific region such as South-East Asia and then expanded to other regions.
- The presented list of potential universities are a mix of comprehensive and technical universities. The WG is advised to focus on the technical universities. If they join, they will most likely show a stronger commitment to the network.
- The Steering Committee advises to focus our efforts on South-Korea and Japan. The reason being for South-Korea that none of our members are particularly strong in that country. Additionally, POSTECH has approached CLUSTER and therefore has shown a strong commitment and willingness to become more international.
  The situation for Singapore is more difficult. Since they are already very international and have strong individual connects to the CLUSTER members, their need to join the network is much lower. Japan on the other hand is trying to become more international. They are more likely to be interested in becoming a member.

The members of the Steering Committee advise to contact only Japan rather than Singapore.

Based on the discussion and advice of the Steering Committee, the following universities will be approached:
1) POSTECH (South-Korea)
   They already approached CLUSTER and remain interested. However, due to new presidential elections at POSTECH, a definitive answer will have to wait until elections are over.
   The current CLUSTER presidency will contact them in the following months.
2) Tokyo Tech / Tokyo Institute of Technology (Japan)
   This decision is made based on the background information provided by the CLUSTER members (i.e. research partnerships, mobility, overall experience with the institution as a partner,…)

The topic of CLUSTER as a global network will be the main discussion during the next Steering Committee / General Assembly in Leuven.

3.2. CLUSTER & Africa

Jos Vander Sloten gives the update on the working group. The main tasks of the group are to focus on the upcoming Erasmus+ project on 'Capacity Building in Higher Education'. Secondly, is the strategy towards Africa. We are trying to identify possible networks in Africa which are similar to CLUSTER. The aim is to find two types of potential partners. In the short-term, we will be looking for African universities to collaborate with during projects. In the long-term, we want to see which universities might be able to join CLUSTER as an (associate) member.

3.3. Communication

Klaus Rümmele presents the update regarding the testimonials. They started with analysing good practice examples from different partners and set the aim of CLUSTER testimonials. A guideline will be created for partners explaining the format and content of the testimonials. (See presentation on the CLUSTER intranet)

3.4. GAST

Mirko Varano gives on update on the completed, current and upcoming projects under CLUSTER.
KTH will coordinate and submit a proposal for InComm 2. The results of the first edition were presented during the 2022 Steering Committee in Torino. E4T was very successful and we are considering a second version of the project, for which we still need a coordinator. The focus would shift to a more external focus as well as a more sustainable end-goal. (The full overview of projects can be found in the presentation on the CLUSTER intranet.)

The working group reminds everyone that if they want assistance, they need to notify GAST in a timely manner.

3.5. Mobility

The update on the WG Mobility is given by Pascale Conard. The main topics were the Blended Intensive Programs ("How to organize a BIP") and communication to the other WG's.
The main partners in the BIP are KTH, UPC, UCL and KU Leuven. Pascale elaborates on both the online and physical part of the BIP program. The physical part will be hosted by KU Leuven. Other topics related to the BIP project include communication and grade conversion. (See presentation on the CLUSTER intranet)

Klaus Rümmele questions why Montréal is not one of the main partners, given their knowledge and activity in the BIP context as shown during the previous General Assembly. Additionally, it would be a great opportunity to have a stronger involvement of our Associated Partners. Pascale responds by explaining that Montréal is strongly in favour of the format. As far as she understand PolyMtl is still looking internally on how they can be more involved in the organisation.

Jos Vander Sloten also notes that the CLUSTER BIP can differentiate itself from similar initiatives by other networks and/or alliances because of the specialized focus on Engineering Education.

Laurent Nelissen ask what other actions they can take to increase the student involvement. Jules Vanpée explains that finding student representatives for the CSO would be a good first step. They are the gateway to inform and potentially attract other students. However, the assistance of the different CLUSTER partners is needed to efficiently find and integrate these student representatives.

Jos Vander Sloten further elaborates that one of the action taken by KU Leuven at the beginning of the presidency was to give the CSO members a place in the different working groups. Involving them in an active way works very well. The Entrepreneurship event in KU Leuven for example was the result of an active collaboration between the WG Entrepreneurship and the CSO. Klaus Rümmele further supports this statement by pointing out the active involvement shown by a student in the WG Communication.

4. Strategic Discussion – The Onion & The Spider

The presentation on the position of CLUSTER within the numerous alliances and networks is given by Peter Van Puyvelde.

The WG came up with two models. The onion which represents a layered structure. The question is what layer does CLUSTER take and is this an appropriate model. On the other hand we have the spider model. This shows the different alliances that the CLUSTER representatives belong to. The spider operates in an environment between these alliances, but others such as CESAER and LERU are also present. The advantage of the spider is that it can move fast within the web.

Peter points to a very recent report that makes a first assessment on the networks and alliances (See the link to this report in the presentation on the CLUSTER Intranet). The report has two main parts that are interesting for CLUSTER. Namely, 'Benefits and Challengers' and 'Future Developments'.

Peter focusses the attention to the current situation of CLUSTER. He refers to the earlier GAST update which shows that CLUSTER can be successful in projects on EU level. There is also the BIP as talked about by Pascale which proves we have a tradition of collaboration and sharing of information. This is applicable to both within European borders and beyond. Additionally, one of the main issues other networks face are long-term funding. One of the strengths of CLUSTER is that it works with membership fees, meaning our worries

regarding funding are less present. We also work on a voluntary basis and have less problems with regulatory issues.

The strengths of CLUSTER show that our network aligns more with the spider model. Peter explains how CLUSTER can be seen as a pilot lab. It can move fast, try out new things and share the results. This is an important advantage we have. If we look at the position of CESAER, they play an important advocacy role. This is a part CLUSTER should not play, but a link between our organizations can be the sharing of best practices or providing white papers.

Finally, we need to think about 'how to expand the web'. This is an important long-term vision as reflected in previous presentations such as the WG Associated Partners.

Discussion:

- Luc Sels
  The European University Initiatives have become an important new reality. If we look at UNA Europa, it shows a lot of promise and is quickly developing. If funding is discontinued, I believe both UNA Europa and CLUSTER will be able to remain operational. UNA Europa would become very similar to CLUSTER and I see this also happening with a few other alliances such as UNITE!
  Most alliances that are becoming successful are build upon prior experience of individual members in joint voluntary initiatives. That is an important statement regarding the current importance of CLUSTER. Additionally, regarding the future positioning of CLUSTER, the network does not only focus on collaboration in education. The network can develop a strong backbone in research. This is much easier for us because of our specific disciplinary focus if compared to the other more comprehensive university alliances.

  My conclusion, if I look at several alliances, is that they lack a clear purpose. When you compare UNA Europa, CircleU and UNITE! you see three very different stories. Each having their own idiosyncratic and unique objectives. While others are so specific that they are very far removed from the initial concept set by Macron regarding alliances. We will not be able to sustain the current 500 existing alliances, so something will change in the future.
  Keeping contact with the best alliances is the way forward, and maintain the position of a spider in the web. Try to keep the connection between good functioning alliances going through CLUSTER.

- Laurent Nelissen
  One of the key points of TU/e was to remain active in CLUSTER. For the future and to get more continuation on students, we might also need to focus on PhD students. They can be a good step for CLUSTER since they remain active for at least 3 years.

We might need to make 2 or 3 slides on the CLUSTER homepage showing what our network has achieved. That people see that we have been successful and active without EU funding since 1999.

- Roberto Zanino

CLUSTER should not be seen as either an onion or a spider. Rather, it is a combination of both models. Where the onion sets the boundary conditions and shows the way internationalization can be seen today, the spider is complementary.

Change to the current alliance situation is on the horizon. We now see the competitiveness between the alliances as was written by Macron in the initial objective. Furthermore, on a political level, we are going to have a different committee and parliament.

I agree with the main conclusion, the first bullet of the executive summary, the sustainability of the initiative is questionable. But we will need to wait until next year to see the political landscape and the support we can expect.

I do not fully agree with the statement regarding the focus on PhD. The future of CLUSTER will strongly depend on the focus the new commission will bring. If they focus on supporting research all alliances will follow. That is where the topic of internationalization comes back, that could provide a strong asset which we can also use to develop the narrative Peter was asking for.

- Lourdes Reig

We do not know what will happen within the alliances in the future, but it is true that the landscape will change. The support we currently receive is not so big. We need to make sure that CLUSTER has an added value. We have a very strategic position. I also agree that CLUSTER is both of the mentioned models. The onion defines the landscape we are currently in and compares us to other networks. The spider describes the movement, how fast we can move in all direction. This should be translated in concrete actions we can support.

We are all in alliances but when we are in CLUSTER we are not representing our alliances. This provides us with the opportunity to discuss and look what is happening from an outside perspective, CLUSTER can move outside. Here we can compare what each of us is doing in our alliances which is not only interesting for CLUSTER both also for our alliances. For example, raising certain topics and discuss how everyone is handling these. Important to me is to promote the idea of CLUSTER as a pilot lab and being a connector.

- Stefan Östlund

We indeed need to be competitive and not just focus on being European. Also, CLUSTER has revitalized and the working groups are trying to see what we can learn from each other. I really support the idea of trying new things and implementing them quickly which is possible because we do not have to spend so much time on governance.

- Klaus Rümmele
  I agree what Lourdes has described. I think what you did at the start of the presidency, providing financial support to the working groups if they wish to implement ideas, is something that can be closely linked to the idea of pilot labs. This strengthens the point Lourdes raised on considering what working groups we need in the future.

- Eirini Sarigiannidou
  We need to let our alliances know that CLUSTER exists and can play an important role in this scenario.

- Petri Suomala
  I agree with a lot that has already been said such as sharing experiences and fast prototyping, that is something that can be added to the narrative

- Luc Sels
  There are many alliances, but not many focused on technical universities. So do not overestimate the pressure that is put externally on the CLUSTER network. One of the reasons CLUSTER is interesting for KU Leuven is the fact that it is not a network of comprehensive universities.

5. **Sustainability Policy**

Laurent Nelissen explains that at TU/e sustainability has taken a more prominent role, especially regarding collaboration with industry. TU/e will no longer do research 'for' or 'with' companies that have a negative ecological impact i.e. oil companies. This has an important impact, because approximately 35% of the annual income is derived from research with companies.

Laurent poses the question if other universities have, or are working on, similar sustainability policies. Do universities struggle with this issue? Do you experience an impact on your student population? For instance, do you have students who no longer do research or study at your institution if you collaborate with ecological negative companies.

Laurent will provide Jules with the statement written by TU/e on this issue of sustainability. It includes a list of conditions that must be followed for collaboration to be possible. Jules will share this document with the CLUSTER partners and ask for feedback.

Discussion:
Petri answers that they have a more broad policy. Aalto follows a strict process to see whether a potential partner aligns with the values and ethical considerations of the university. This also includes aspects such as sustainability and ecological impact. Petri can provide more documented information.

Alberto Godio mentions a similar discussion on national level in Italy, but it is not limit to sustainability. The universities question whether they can receive funding from gas & oil companies. This is an internal debate in every university. It is a dangerous question not just because of funding and sustainability, but also limitations on the freedom of research. As a network we could do something in such a field.

Laurent further asks if we can have a CLUSTER agreement, that we as CLUSTER partners follow the same guideline in regards to collaboration with certain companies.

KIT explains that they have a sustainability policies in general, but it is not that explicit when it comes to companies or research area's.

Grenoble has been approached by the students on this issue regarding education and research. So a new council on sustainability has been created with representatives from student, faculty and management level. Once Eirini has all the texts, she will share them.

KTH explains that the approach to this issue needs to be well considered. If we want to write something down, we need to really think it through. We do not want to trigger things we do not want triggered.

UPC does not have such a policy, but there is a document that could be considered similar. For instance, they cannot collaborate in project with military objective. However these boundaries are at certain times very difficult to set. They do not have this debate today.

Sustainability at KU Leuven is in the portfolio of one of the vice-rectors for 'Science and Engineering', and is also a horizontal aspect university wide. However, KU Leuven is not aware of a policy regarding the topics that were raised. They do have a council that meets on an ad hoc-basis to discuss certain collaborations or research. Particularly in regards to "use and mis-use" of military conduct.

6. **Closing & AOB**

We give our thanks and say goodbye to Laurent Nelissen who will no longer be the CLUSTER representative of TU/e. He will be replaced by Ines Lopez Arteaga.
Jules Vanpée presents the program of the upcoming General Assembly in Leuven. All members are invited to save the date, and will receive the registration form in a couple months. (See presentation on the CLUSTER intranet).

Klaus Rümmele ask about the continuation of the presidency. Jos Vander Sloten explains that talks are ongoing regarding the next CLUSTER president for 2024-2026. Members are also free to send in their candidacy.

CLUSTER Secretary-General Jos Vander Sloten thanks everyone for their presence and active contribution. Jos thanks Aalto University for their hospitality and closes the Steering Committee.

Upcoming meetings and events:
- Steering Committee I and General Assembly, 10-12 April 2024 – hosted by KU Leuven