

The IRIS 2024 (Bratislava, Slovakia) again in-person format

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Abstract

The IRIS 2024 course (the International Research Interdisciplinary School) was held in Bratislava, Slovakia, June 22 -25, 2024 (Fig. 1). After 3 years of restrictions due to COVID pandemic, this year IRIS was again in the in-person format.

During the 3 years of restrictions three IRIS courses were organized either in the on-line format or in a “hybrid” format combining in-person and on-line formats, the “key organizers” were Slovakia and Kyrgyzstan. The on-line format helped to overcome the travel restrictions and to maintain the continuity of courses. The added value were the skills obtained utilizing MS Teams or Zoom communication, which became an integral part of courses organization as well as of interaction between participants and faculty.

However, the on-line format has its limitations. The program of IRIS training is rather demanding on the concentration both of participants as well as of the faculty and it is not easy to focus on the screen for more than eight hours. Also working in groups in “rooms” is missing the personal interaction.

This year there were also other modifications. According the original “Rules for organizing” it is recommended to select the

venue in the country outside big cities. However, this year IRIS was organized in the facilities of the Slovak Medical University (SMU) in Bratislava, the capital of the Slovak Republic. In this way the course, originally developed for the university (Duke University, Durham, NC, USA), found its way back to the university environment. In some modified form, the program was also adapted at this university for training academic writing skills for PhD students.

The IRIS 2024 was organized in collaboration with the Slovak Academy of Sciences, which provided its residential facility in the vicinity of the SMU for those faculty members and participants who did not live in Bratislava.

The program schedule was also modified (Table 1). The schedule was strictly followed, so that the on-line faculty and part-time faculty could organize their time accordingly and join the plenary discussions. The program lasted till 17:00 o'clock; this schedule provided sufficient additional time for the social interaction of participants and faculty members, to explore the city and enjoy events of the Bratislava Cultural Summer in downtown.

Table 1. The general daily program

8:45 – 9:15	Introduction
9:15 – 11:00	Working in groups
11:00 – 11:20	Break / coffee time
11:20 – 12:45	Group presentations and discussion
12:45 – 13:45	Lunch time
13:45 – 15:00	Working in groups
15:00 – 15:20	Break / coffee time
15:20 – 16:20	Group presentations and discussion
16:20 – 17:00	Working in groups

The total number of participants was 11, four from Poland and seven from Slovakia. The age and experience ranged from pre-graduates to senior researcher, which created a good

basis for dividing participants into mixed groups – mixed by professional background, experience, nationality and age.

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Figure 1. The IRIS 2024 group photo in front of the Slovak Medical University, Bratislava, Slovakia.

Thus, the original goal of IRIS “to establish enjoyable cross discipline/cross cultural collaboration” was extended to cross-generation collaboration – an important skill fundamental for building partnership in research teams.

The participants were divided into three groups, this number allowed to devote sufficient time to discuss details and provide feedback both from faculty as well as from participants during the plenary discussions. The following training projects were developed during the course:

1. **Group Brainstormers:** Effect of Video Consultations on Re-admission Rate of Patients with Anorexia/Bulimia; Martyna Świerkowska (Poland), Daniel Havaj (Slovakia), Katarina Rejleková (Slovakia), Kinga Buze (Poland).
2. **Group Obesity Fighters:** Effect of Oxytocin on Fat Tissue Reduction in Individuals with Obesity; Natalia Cheda (Poland), Katarina Horčíčáková (Slovakia), Martin Špilák (Slovakia), Patrik Palacka (Slovakia).
3. **Group OGNIP:** Effect of Omega-3-Fatty-Acid-Enriched Parenteral Nutrition on Hospital Stay Duration in Pediatric Patient with Chronic Graft-Versus-Host Disease Post Bone Marrow Transplantation; Maria Szighardtová (Slovakia), Jakub Krawczyk (Poland), Laura Banovčanová (Slovakia).

The IRIS course is characterized by an intensive interaction between faculty and participants; therefore, the role of faculty is crucial. The “full-time faculty” - those present during the whole course - were Ljuba Bacharova (Slovakia), Eric Eisenstein, (USA), Jonathan Lipton (Australia), Anna Mierzynska (Poland), Katarzyna Piotrowicz (Poland) and Jana Svehlíková (Slovakia). Additionally, Gulmira Kudarberdieva (Kyrgyzstan) joined online and Peter Skrak joined in-person in selected workshops. In this way, the participants are provided with diverse feedback, and on the other hand, the IRIS initiative is maintaining and further building the network of the international faculty. The participants also appreciated very much the presence of Zora Krivosikova (Slovakia), the former IRIS participant, a specialist in biostatistics, which is another important aspect of doing research.

The IRIS 2024 course was recognized as a part of the postgraduate medical education for physicians by Slovak Medical Association and was evaluated by 26 credits in total.

The key organiser of the IRIS 2024 was Premedix Academy, NGO, in collaboration with the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The Premedix team included Ljuba Bacharova, the head of the IRIS education in Premedix, Marta Kollarova and Kristian Guzma, who were responsible for the project management and coordination.

Feedback from participants: The participants were generally satisfied with the project and excited about the new knowledge, skills and friendships they took away from the experience:

- "In these 4 days I learned more than in 10 years since the beginning of my med studies."
- "Yes, I would recommend my colleagues to participate. There are many reasons 1) new friends and colleagues 2) stepping out of comfort zone 3) many new information 4) practical skills which are useful in more activities than just study design."
- "The best experience. Love it!"
- "I found many new friends and got some new useful skills."
- "I would highly recommend it to anyone, not just PhD students. For me, as an associate professor, it was a precious experience and I think this course is a need for everyone who wants to do good and meaningful research."

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