

Workshop Report

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Feedback report from the first ParAqua hybrid meeting - with considerations on challenges and advantages of mixed events

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SUMMARY

The first hybrid meeting and workshop of the COST Action "ParAqua - Applications for zoospore parasites in aquatic systems" was held from 4th to 7th of July 2022 at the Multifunctional Center for Social Activities and Welfare of the Larnaka Municipality in Larnaca, Cyprus. 22 participants from 11 countries and 15 institutions attended on site, 26 participants from 9 countries and 26 institutions attended online. The activities included presentations, open discussions and collaborative work.

This report presents the results of the feedback survey sent to participants after the event. The survey was anonymous and included multiple choice responses (checkboxes) and short answers to complete and provide arguments to the checkboxes answers. 16 surveys were collected from the 54 participants, 13 from onsite and 3 from virtual attendees. Based on feedbacks and comments from the participants, the report will also include some considerations on challenges and advantages of mixed events.

The report will contribute to set-up an active network and effective communication strategy for ParAqua, by describing advantages and limitations of different settings based on the Action experience and provide tips and hints to foster collaboration and effective work in hybrid mode.

INTRODUCTION

These last few years have been challenging from different points of view, including the need for rapid replanning and rethinking the way we used to meet and communicate. Although technological advancements such as better internet access and the availability of user-friendly virtual conference software brought already online meetings and webinars on the agenda for quite some time now (Chidambaram and Jones, 1993), during the periods of lock down and social distancing everything from one day to another had to move in a purely virtual space. Events and activities which before were still mainly considered to require a physical presence (large conferences, trainings, collaborative workshops...) had to be rescheduled and replanned in a fully online mode. During the restrictions time, virtual meetings have proved to be extremely efficient and a necessary tool to make consultations and take decisions in large international groups. However, at that time hybrid events (i.e. events in which at the same time participants co-located onsite and participants online from remote engage together via audio and video technologies) were still not considered as a good solution, and even seen as not ideal as potentially creating two classes of attendees due to the differences to access facility among participants onsite and online (Moss et al 2021).

Now that restrictions have been lifted, the modalities of the meetings we organise and participate are not constrained. Hybrid events started to be more accepted and in some cases even recommended. The way we are used to working will look different and different modalities and settings will come. Due also to more accepted habits of social distancing, the energy crisis and the need to protect the environment and economise resources, we are now starting to think differently again as we did during the last couple of years (Moss et al 2021). A great dynamism is developing around the topic of hybrid meetings and events. If before the focus was still on exclusively virtual events, now the tendency is more centred on the new way to go hybrid (Mariotti et al 2023). A shift is expected in the next years, the prevalence of hybrid meetings is expected to accelerate (Reed & Allen, 2022; Richter, 2020) and a proportion of 75% of total meetings is predicted in 2024 (Finnell, 2019).

Virtual participation to conferences and workshops has become more accepted and in some cases even encouraged. As a consequence of the easy access to virtual events and the improved quality of the facilities, hybrid events are now considered as more inclusive and democratic than before. Hybrid events are now seen as having the potential to mitigate social inequalities since easier access allows everybody to participate in the scientific discourse, independent of gender, race, geography or social status (Hanson et al 2018; Sarabipour 2020; Niner et al 2021). Beside this, surely we can probably consider also a certain comfort in the freedom to decide which event to attend on site or when it will be preferred to join remotely, without having the obligation to travel from one meeting to another as can happen during busy times when a lot of events tend to overlap.

There is more and more consensus that hybrid conferences and meetings will be essential for the future (Carden 2022; Langin 2021). Among the funding opportunities provided by COST is included a "Virtual Networking Support Grant" as pilot project until 31 October 2024, aiming specifically at "assessing and supporting the new forms of collaboration in virtual and hybrid settings as a complement to traditional ways of collaboration".

Despite the popularity that such events are gaining now, still it remains ambitious to organise good and effective hybrid meetings and workshops. Difficulties and challenges we identified are mainly related to few aspects:

- Organisation - inclusiveness, logistics (time zones, breaks, time to keep focus online)
- Facility - participation and ease to express questions and opinions
- Meeting perception and feeling part of the group - mixing events, icebreakers and communication.

In line with the current policy and to involve more members in the activities, ParAqua (Rasconi et al 2022) decided to organise the activities which are not in pure virtual mode in hybrid mode and try to provide whenever possible a remote access to members and interested people. The first hybrid meeting and workshop of ParAqua was held from 4th to 7th of July 2022 at the Multifunctional Center for Social Activities and Welfare of the Larnaka Municipality in Larnaca, Cyprus. 22 participants from 11 countries and 15 institutions attended on site, 26 participants from 9 countries and 26 institutions attended online. The activities included presentations, open discussions and collaborative work in small groups (Gavrilović et al 2022).

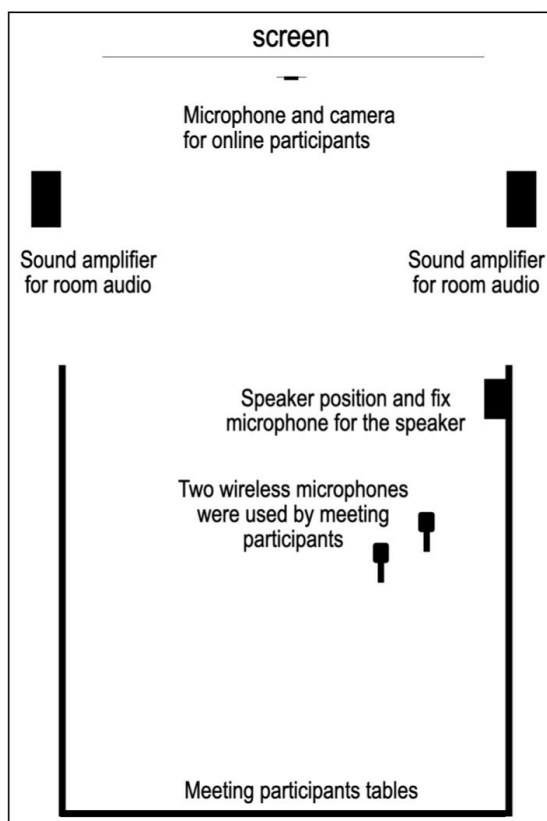


Fig.1 Meeting room setup

The meeting was organised in a large room where all the onsite participants were seated in a “U” shape table conformation (Fig. 1). On the bottom of the meeting room was a large screen on which remote participants were displayed. Below the large screen there was a camera and an integrated microphone and

on each side on the room wall was placed an amplifier for the room audio.

Speakers were asked to talk in front of everybody from the dedicated position on the first table of the “U” shape and next to the camera. A dedicated computer was connected to the projector with online shared screen. The video conference software was Zoom (zoom.us). Each participant had a personal computer, although not all were connected and with the camera on. Two wireless microphones were also used for the interventions of the participants.

After the event a feedback survey was sent to participants. The survey was anonymous and included multiple choice responses (checkboxes) and a short query to complete and provide arguments to the checkbox answers. Questions mainly focused on the meeting organisation and facility, the meeting perception (length, ease to follow, balance among presentations vs discussion time), the overall meeting experience and intention for next meetings attendance. The survey was important as informal assessment of a substantial milestone for the ParAqua Action as this was the first hybrid meeting and workshop after a beginning marked by strict limitations for travelling and face-to-face interactions and during which only virtual events could be organised.

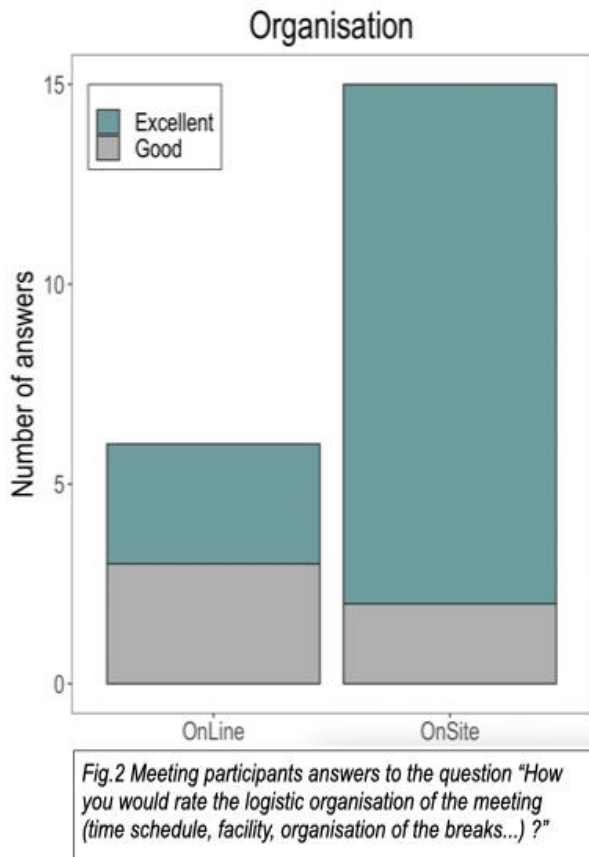
In this report the data from the feedback survey will be presented and discussed. A crucial point will concern the feedback on the different activities that were organised during the event (presentations, open discussions, collaborative brainstorming and writing). Interactive activities indeed constitute a bit of extra challenge on a hybrid setting compared to more classical webinars, where attendees are less active and interactions are often limited to Q&A sessions. Special focus will be given to considerations on challenges of mixed events as identified before (meeting organisation and facility, ease of discussion and inclusion, general perception of the meeting and overall experience). Based on feedbacks and comments from the participants, benefits and limitations for both settings will be presented and discussed. The report will also be the opportunity to evaluate strategies to foster collaboration and effective work in a hybrid setting based on the Action experience as well as on experience and suggestions from existing reports and papers already published by other teams and projects.

21 surveys were collected from the 54 participants, 15 from onsite and 6 from virtual attendees. We applied Fisher Exact Test on table transformed data to test differences in replies among onsite vs online attendance. The statistics and graphical representation of the data were performed using the open software R (<https://www.r-project.org>) and the packages “dplyr” and “ggplot2”.

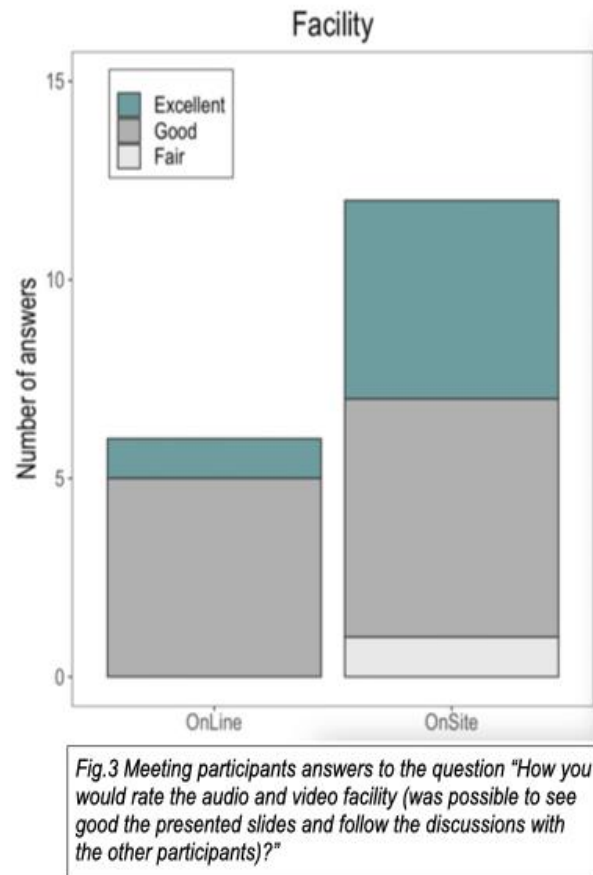
SURVEY RESULTS

The logistic organisation of the meeting (time schedule, facility, organisation of the breaks...) was rated as “Excellent” (76.2% of total participants answers) or “Good” (23.8% of total participants answers). The majority of onsite participants (86%, 13 in total) voted “Excellent”, while the online participants were equally divided among “Excellent (50%, 3 in total) and “Good” (50%, 3 in total) (Fig. 2). The difference among onsite and online

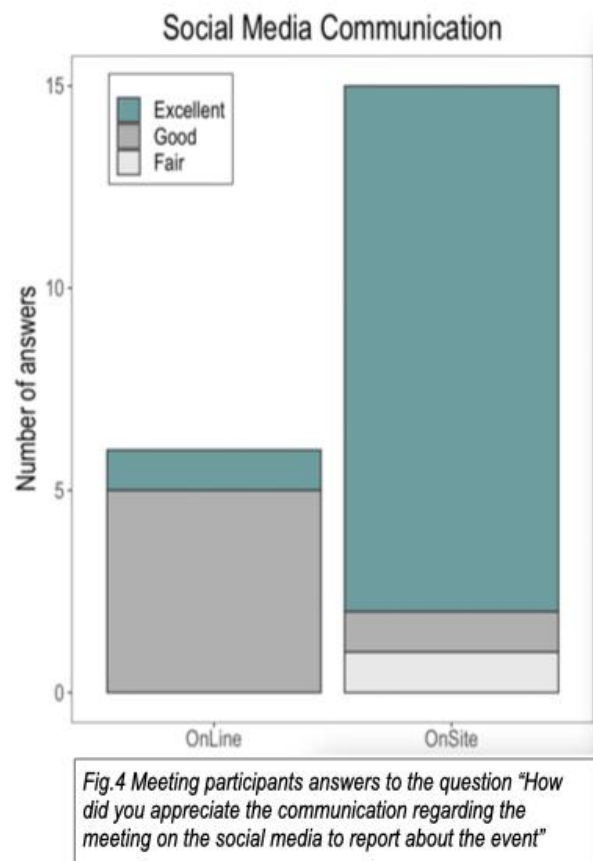
attendees answers were not significant (Fisher's Test, $p > 0.05$). The location in Cyprus was perceived by some participants as a bit remote and difficult to reach due to long flights. However, the choice of a meeting venue close to the international airport was appreciated as well the attractiveness of a remarkable touristic place for the summer period. Comments on the length of the meeting were quite in agreement that the duration was good for the planned activities and onsite participants appreciated the time dedicated to social activities and the good balance between presentations, discussions and collaborative work. Only two onsite participants and one online participant would have preferred a shorter meeting.



The audio and video facility was rated as "Excellent" (40% of total participants answers), "Good" (55% of total participants answers) and "Fair" (5% of total answers, 1 participant). The onsite participants voted equally for "Excellent" (46%, 7 participants) and good (40%, 6 participants). One onsite participant voted "Fair". The online participants voted for the large majority "Good" (83%, 5 participants) and only one rated the facility "Excellent" (Fig. 3). The difference among onsite and online attendees answers were not significant (Fisher's Test, $p > 0.05$). Most of the comments concerned the ease to follow from the online attendees, notably during the plenary discussions and the opportunity to participate actively. Onsite participants which rated good were mainly concerned about virtual attendees and in the comments appeared several times the perception that online participants were maybe not able to follow properly due to the audio facility. Online participant confirmed the difficulty to follow the discussions and to see the speakers well during the presentations.



The communication on the social media during the event was rated as "Excellent" (66.7% of total participants answers),



“Good” (28.6% of total participants answers) and “Fair” (5% of total answers, 1 participant). The answers were significantly different among onsite and online participants (Fisher’s Test, $p=0.001$). The majority of the onsite participants judged the communication “Excellent” (86%, 13 participants), one participant “Good” and one participant “Fair”. The online attendees voted mainly “Good” (83%, 5 participants) and one “Excellent” (Fig. 4). In the comments most of the participants which answered “Good” specified that they don’t follow all the communications on the social media, and in the comment for the “Fair” answer it was suggested to design a responsible for communication to start engaging in the communication more in advance before the meeting.

The overall meeting experience was rated “Excellent” by 76% of total participants and “Good” by 23.8% of total participants. The answers were significantly different among onsite and online participants (Fisher’s Test, $p=0.01$). Almost all the onsite participants voted “Excellent” (93%, 14 participants) and one “Good”. The virtual attendees voted mainly “Good” (66%, 4 participants) and two voted “Excellent”. (Fig. 5). One of the onsite participants commented on the location and pointed out the current difficult conditions for plane travels. The online participants mainly pointed out the need to increase the time for discussion and to create more opportunities for debates in small groups.

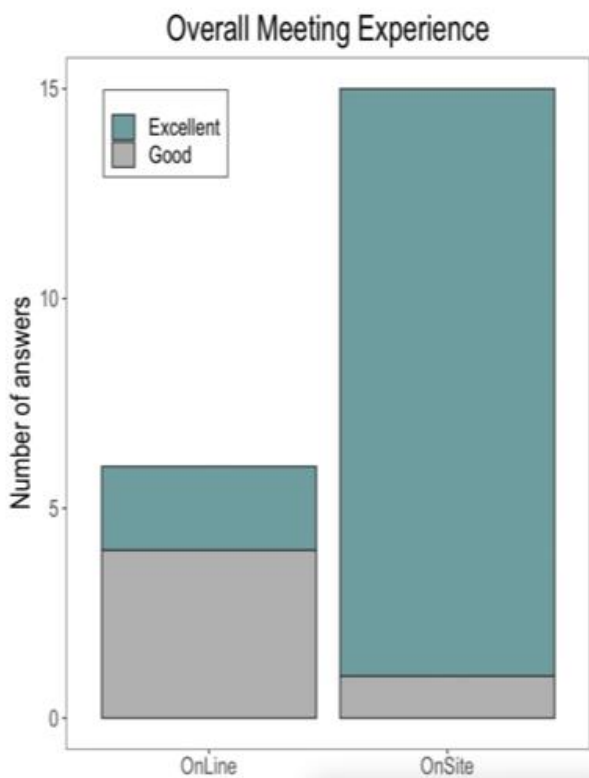


Fig.5 Meeting participants answers to the question “How would you rate the overall experience at the meeting”

The last questions was about further plans to join Action meetings. No negative answers were recorded and all the meeting attendees plan to continue participating in the future. 84% of total participants plan to join onsite and 15.8% virtually (Fig. 6). The answers were significantly different among onsite

and online participants (Fisher’s Test, $p=0.001$), and we could observe a slight majority of attendees onsite convinced of their choice (80%, compared to 66% of attendees online). Two online attendees (33% of total virtual participants) and one onsite participant will attend online the next meeting.

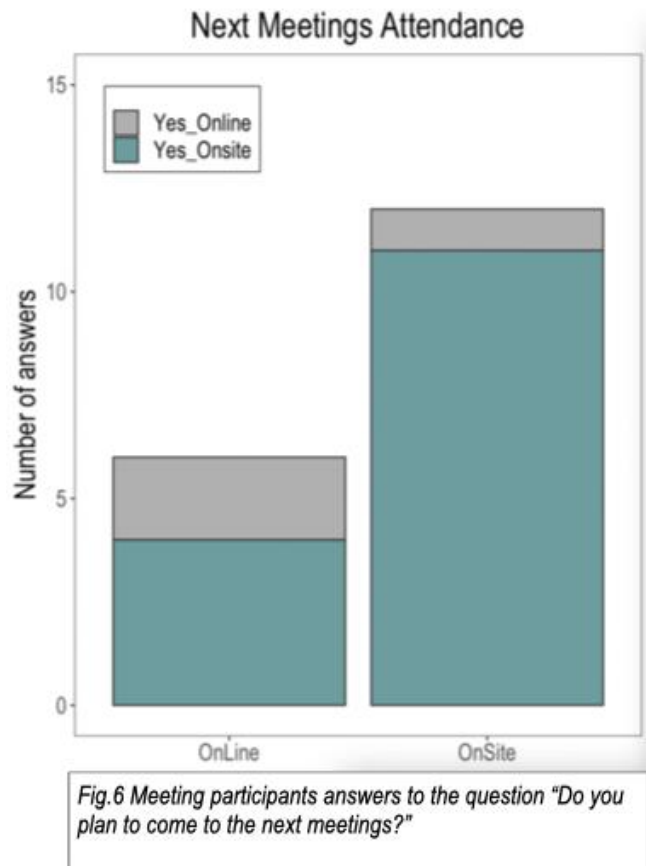


Fig.6 Meeting participants answers to the question “Do you plan to come to the next meetings?”

DISCUSSION

The meeting logistic organisation (time schedule, facility, organisation of the breaks) was scored higher by onsite attendees, confirming that in general colocalized participants enjoy more the experience. The meeting location probably contributed to the more positive judgement, as shown in the comments regarding the dates and location, which pointed out the nice touristic place and the time dedicated to social activities (e.g. gala dinner, walking tour of the city, see Gavrilović et al 2022 for a report on the meeting activities).

The meeting audio and video facility was the only point judged by majority as “Good”, all the others questions received a majority of “Excellent” evaluation. The main criticisms concerned the audio facility and the difficulty to follow properly the discussions from the online participants. We noticed the problem during the meeting as there was only one microphone located below the screen, which was not close enough to speakers and not powerful enough to transmit the audio from the room in a good way. As we noticed sound amplifiers on the two sides of the room, we tried to use then a microphone that can be passed to the different intervenants and diffuse the sound through the amplifiers. Apparently the audio could be improved slightly, but still the issues persisted and also a bit less comfort was perceived by the participants due to the necessity to remember to always talk with the microphone.

Most of the critics came to the audio and video facility, and this relates with the difficulty to organise effective discussion and making everybody feeling part on the meeting. Probably the technology advancements will come to help, microphones and cameras are reaching high quality standards for more affordable prices even for domestic use when joining a meeting from home office. But certainly it will be a bit also on the creativity of the organisers to set the room and the logistic to have a most inclusive and participatory attendance from all the participants. Sometime it is proposed that colocalised speakers remain seated at their place and connect with the camera from their laptop keeping the experience more similar to a fully virtual event. But I believe in this case it will be the onsite part overlooked, with attendees in the same room interacting each other as during a virtual event.

Most likely we will have to revise the concept of plenary and collective discussions during hybrid events. The facility is a crucial point to make a meeting effective for everybody in the same way. The risk is that virtual attendees won't get the full benefit of the experience and will not feel involved in the same way. Obviously virtual audience should not have the feeling to be overlooked during discussions and everybody has to be included in the same participatory way. A good hybrid conference gives both audiences equal agency to ask questions and follow the content and an equal perception of active participation to discussions.

Should we consider a slight different organisation, maybe with more discussions in small break out rooms rather than big discussions in plenaries? In each break out rooms a participant was asked to connect with his laptop and camera as support for the hybrid discussions. We could observe easier interaction between online and onsite participants, as was also confirmed by the request of increase time dedicated to such discussion in small groups.

It has been suggested for effective hybrid meetings to think "digital first", which means to detach from the idea that hybrid conferences are mainly organised as an in-person event with some online attendees attached to it (Carden 2022). The idea is thus to configure the meeting by putting attention and emphasis on the online participants first. Probably as we noticed and as was suggested in some comments, smaller groups are more effective for active discussion and participation. The discussions in the Break Out Rooms are then reported during plenaries, where a second phase of the meeting can start, and were onsite and online attendees can be equally asked to intervene as rapporteur for the room and being speakers for their group.

CONCLUSIONS

Going back to the normality of only virtual or only on site events seems restrictive now and even unfair. Personally I strongly believe in this way of conducting meetings and discussion. Is much more inclusive and as event organiser I really enjoy the feeling of opening opportunities for a wider audience that would be inaccessible in a conventional in-person conference.

Obviously challenges remains and encompass several aspects, which risk to turn a event intended to be open and inclusive for everybody in a bad experience and for some participants even to give perception to not be actively involved and to attend only as spectators.

Feeling being part of the group is fundamental to create a strong team spirit and being effective on the collaborative work to reach common goals. But the responsibility of online attendees to be visible or participate more or less should not be in any case exclusively on the shoulders of the meeting organisers. Keeping the camera on, be active listener, participate to discussion and focus on ongoing activities remain also a choice of the participant.

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