

The Hybrid USERN 2020 Congress: New Standards for Events in Practice

Sara Hanaei^{1,2}, Mojdeh Sarzaeim^{1,2}, Niloufar Yazdanpanah^{1,2}, Zahra Rahimi Pirkoohi¹, Heliya Ziaei¹, Kawthar Mohamed^{1,2}, Noosha Samieefar^{1,3}, Mahsa Keshavarz-Fathi^{1,2}, Zahra Kolahchi^{1,2}, Negar Moradian^{1,2}, Sara Momtazmanesh^{1,2}, Simin Seyedpour^{1,2}, Ali Jaberipour¹, Saboura Ashkevarian¹, Nima Rezaei^{1,2}

¹ Universal Scientific Education and Research Network (USERN), Tehran, Iran

² School of Medicine, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

³ School of Medicine, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

Turning threats to opportunity

The year 2020 started with one of the most critical health threats in the 21st century; the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which spread throughout the world and influenced human lives and activities (1). After a year of challenging endeavors to overcome this pandemic, it is still very far from control in many regions. Importantly, human life and activities should continue, even in such times. For this reason, along with all the restrictions, there have been new regulations for many activities; some were canceled or postponed, others were continued virtually, and a few were held to define new standards. The events of different kinds were very much influenced by this pandemic. While many of them were canceled initially, there was a trend to adjust the standards for resuming the events. Accordingly, and although the pandemic has been a threat for scientific activities and gatherings, it was also an opportunity to develop remote scientific works (e.g., publishing books or papers) or organizing scientific events with new hygienic considerations (2).

The big family of Universal Scientific Education and Research Network (USERN) had a challenging year too. But importantly, this did not stop this network from continuing its scientific goals. As a result in this year, USERN had about 300 publications, including four international books with collaborations of scientists all over the world, and also organized scientific events (the 3rd Spring event, the 3rd USERN research week, and the 5th USERN Congress) with defining a new model for such activities. Of note, and during the first five years since its initiation, USERN has built a unique network for joint collaboration of seniors and juniors to promote scientific activities. As a consequence of this borderless scientific collaboration, USERN has established over 50 national and international offices, over 100 interest

groups, organized over 550 scientific events, and published nearly 1000 research papers by the end of 2020. Proudly, this scientific networking has been highly welcomed by over 470 top 1% scientists and 18 Nobel/Abel Laureates who are among the advisory board members of USERN (3,4) (Figure 1).

The backbone for a rich scientific content

Through networking and developing scientific collaborations, USERN gathered a scientific-rich society of senior scientists and youngsters. USERN advisers, senior book-collaborators, and smooth-spoken scientists were invited to join the USERN 2020 Congress's scientific content with the theme of "Science to Society." Proudly, this year, the scientific content of the Congress was built on the kind collaboration of 148 expert speakers from 35 countries in all five continents (Figure 2). The borderless scientific collaborations of USERN in the past had made them dedicated allies and friends who all made it possible together. Despite the travel restrictions, the virtual part of this hybrid Congress made it possible to have them all in Congress.

The scientific content of the Congress included various programs, which suited every member of academic society. In brief, the keynote lectures were presented by senior expert speakers (either in-person or virtually), and the Congress was proud to host two Nobel Laureates as the honorary speakers, Prof. Jean-Marie Lehn (the Nobel Laureate in Chemistry in 1987) and Prof. Lenald Hartwell (the Nobel Laureate in Physiology or Medicine in 2001), who shared their valuable experiences in science and life. The youngsters' voices had their own place in the Congress as "Junior Talks," which were short presentations concurrent with art performances. The workshops focused on specific topics, and "Meet the Expert" sessions provided students

Corresponding Author: N. Rezaei

Universal Scientific Education and Research Network (USERN), Tehran, Iran
Tel: +98 21 66576573, Fax: +98 21 66929235, E-mail address: rezaei_nima@tums.ac.ir

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with friendly discussions with several senior scientists. There were also some side events focusing on a particular field of science, including InnoUSERN (focusing on innovation and entrepreneurship), U-Pharmacy (focusing on pharmacology), UT-Med (focusing on traditional medicine), and U-Debate (a scientific debate between juniors judged by seniors).

Meanwhile, Congress was supported by more than 20 scientific centers and universities, and parallel events were organized as "Satellite Events," which were managed by USERN offices. USERN webinars included an eight-day program with scientific lectures of international speakers, which was highly welcomed as well. The speakers' interactive participation was an encouragement as they actively attended the other sessions and panels, too (5).

Last but not least, USERN Prize Awarding Festival was held in a hybrid model as well. USERN 2020 Laureates were announced in five fields of science, including Formal sciences, Physical and Chemical Sciences, Biological Sciences, Medical Sciences, and Social sciences. As some of the international USERN Laureates could not attend in-person, H.E ambassadors of their respected countries were invited as a representative to receive their awards.

The hybrid model for the USERN 2020 congress

The USERN 2020 congress was planned on a hybrid model to be appropriate and executable in the COVID-19 situation. The in-person program included only 25% of all participants, and the hygienic protocols were met in the congress venue. The opening ceremony and the prize-awarding festival were streamed online. Thus, the other 75% of participants and the international participants could attend virtually. Moreover, various

programs of the other days of the Congress were held in different parallel halls; so, the participants could choose their favorite, besides avoiding overpopulation in one hall. There were 1574 registered individuals from 48 countries in this Congress (Figure 3).

In general, the hybrid model seems to be a practical solution for organizing events in the pandemic situation, which could be continued in the non-pandemic future as well (2).

The hygienic protocol in the USERN 2020 congress

The 5th USERN Congress was planned and organized in a hybrid model, including both in-person and virtual programs. As a necessity for complying with participants' health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, the new standards for organizing scientific events required careful considerations of the hygienic protocols. Therefore, USERN first defined a resilient protocol for organizing a hybrid scientific event during this pandemic. After running a small pilot in the 3rd USERN research week, the protocol was valid to be successfully executed in the USERN 2020 congress. In brief, all the participants, organizers, and speakers were requested to fill a pre-designed self-report questionnaire about the COVID-19 infection. They were all requested to be committed to their social duty and avoid attending in-person in case of being symptomatic or testing positive for COVID-19. The hygienic protocols were met, including mandatory facial mask-wearing, providing and using hand sanitizers, and social distancing (2). Nevertheless, it should also be emphasized that as the COVID-19 pandemic is a borderless health concern, a borderless effort from all over the world is required to eliminate it and again revive human activities (6,7).



Figure 1. The map of Universal Scientific Education and Research Network (USERN), Jan. 2021

