

Organising EAHIL's first hybrid conference: challenges and opportunities of a pandemic

Wichor Bramer

Erasmus MC- Erasmus University Hospital Rotterdam, the Netherlands
Chair of the Local Organising Committee EAHIL 2022
Contact: w.bramer@erasmusmc.nl

Early plans

Dutch information specialists have always been frequent participants in EAHIL events, however the last EAHIL event in the Netherlands was Utrecht in 1998. In 2016 when a new manager first read our request to visit EAHIL 2016 in Seville with 3 colleagues, he quickly suggested we should host a future EAHIL event in Rotterdam (probably not realizing that the time involved in organizing such an event dwarfs the cost of attending it). It must have been the last day of the 2019 EAHIL Workshop in Basel when Tiina Heino asked me if the Netherlands could prepare a bid for a future EAHIL event. I embraced the idea and asked other Dutch EAHIL participants if they wanted to join me in forming a Local Organising Committee (LOC). Members involved since those first hours were Hans Ket, Kirsten Ziesemer and Chantal den Haan (whom we quickly appointed head of sponsoring). We first met 22 August 2019 in Amsterdam. Despite a vast majority of Amsterdam LOC members, we quickly decided that, due to the costs, Rotterdam would be the host city. In June we contacted a professional conference organiser to help us with the organisation, we visited de Doelen conference center on 17 September 2019, booked a preliminary date, summed the costs, and estimated the revenue. On 6 March 2020 we presented a successful bid for EAHIL 2022 to the EAHIL Board.

COVID changes everything

Then in March 2020 everything we had been taking for granted became unsure because of COVID-19. How long would this whole pandemic take? Surely by the end of the year it would be over, right? Łodz would have to organize an online only conference, but we all expected to be able to meet in person in Istanbul in 2021. Early 2021 it became clear Istanbul would be an online only event too. What should we do, when can we decide? We investigated all options: do we organize an in person event only, a full hybrid conference with live online participants, or an in person conference with a smaller online component? We presented our plans at the closing ceremony of the Istanbul workshop and asked the participants what their plans were. Eighty-two percent indicated they were planning to attend in person. Therefore we proceeded to organize an event with a major in person component, but still kept an open mind for an online component. In our preliminary program we had planned 70 oral presentations, 30 posters, 8 CECs, 12 workshops and 4 plenary speakers, in case we were able to present a full in person program. We decided to implement a few go-no go decisions where we could switch to organizing a smaller online only conference and arranged corresponding cancel and refund contracts with the venues. That way, up until early April we could still cancel the in person event without high costs, if necessary.

Will we go live or online?

In October 2021 we opened the call for abstracts, still with the plans of doing in person presentations only. Together with the International Program Committee (IPC) and our head of department we decided on a few

Memories from EAHIL 2022 Conference Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 1-3 June 2022

go/ no go decisions. We would report to the head of department the outcome of the parameter and the resulting financial implications for the conference. The first milestone was whether enough abstracts would be submitted. The initial abstract submission deadline approached and the number of submissions seemed to be fewer than expected. We surveyed presenters of previous EAHIL events what the reason was not to submit an abstract to EAHIL 2022. We learned that one of the main reasons was uncertainty about being able to travel due to the COVID situation. We then decided to open the abstracts for online only presentations and posters as well. Due to the high cost of simultaneous live streaming we quickly decided not to host a full hybrid event. Also because this might mean many people would choose to attend the event online only. At that moment we decided to add a second week of EAHIL 2022 as an online event. We extended the cancellation agreements with the venues to be able to change to a fully online conference for low costs for a longer period. The decision for each presenter whether to present in person or online could therefore be postponed until early April 2022. This announcement boosted the abstract submission, and in January 2022, with 72 orals, 30 posters, 6 CECs and 14 workshops we made a rather close call of receiving enough abstracts, and decided to proceed to an in person event. Still we would have to accept almost all submissions, and all presenters had to present in person to have a full in person program. Around that time we had been in contact with the National Library of Medicine (NLM) about an extra plenary session in the form of an NLM update, which is often well received at Medical Library Association (MLA) conferences in the USA. When the IPC voted for plenary sessions Guus van den Brekel and Jasmin Schmitz scored equally well, therefore they were both chosen as plenary speakers. We decided to change the preliminary program to include more plenary sessions and time for 55 oral presentations and 10 workshops.

Go/ no go decisions

Then came the second go/no go moment in the evaluation of abstracts. We wanted to have enough high quality oral presentations. The IPC accepted 43 oral presentations as they were, 15 were accepted with comments and we gave 8 submitting authors the chance to revise their submission. We asked submitting authors about their expectation whether to present in person or online and 65% indicated they expected to present in person, therefore we expected to have at least 38 in person oral presentations of enough quality. Though this was not yet sufficient, since we now planned 55 oral presentations, it was not low enough for us to cancel the in person event, though it meant we could not make selections to increase originality and variety of topics.

Early April we had our final go/no go decision when we checked whether presenters had actually registered as in person participants. This turned out to be the case. If there were open time slots for certain sessions we invited presenters of high scoring posters to present their research as an oral presentation, and upgraded Lightning Talks to Oral Presentations. To prevent gaps in the program, presentations that had been planned as in person oral presentations, where the presenter could not travel to Rotterdam due to COVID infection or Visa problems, were planned as live presentations over video connection. That way we were able to offer our in person visitors a full in person program of 52 oral presentations (of which 5 via video connection), 13 posters, 10 workshops, 6 plenary sessions and 4 CECs. The online program had 18 unique oral presentations, 11 posters and one online workshop.

Your experience at EAHIL 2022

Ultimately 230 participants chose to attend in person, and 70 attended online only. Of the people attending in person 98% were satisfied with their choice of participation. Of the participants attending online only 52% were satisfied with their choice to attend online only, even though they were satisfied with the conference overall. When we were planning the conference we were afraid that offering online participation would mean fewer people would attend in person. Of those registered as online participants 70% have participated in the

Memories from EAHIL 2022 Conference Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 1-3 June 2022

online discussions, as well as 30% of in person visitors. Of those attending online 26% indicated that, had we only offered in person registration, they would have likely visited EAHIL 2022 in person. When asked about plans for future EAHIL events 57% of the online visitors indicated that they would prefer to attend future events in person.

Room for improvement

Had we made the decision to go hybrid in an earlier stage this would have improved the conference. Presenters and participants would have been aware of the online component and planned this ahead. In our enthusiasm, and given the high quality abstracts presented live in Rotterdam we added (too) many interesting in person oral presentations to the online discussion sessions. Therefore some of the sessions were rather rushed. This was further increased by some online presenters presenting their research rather than giving a very brief summary. The online conference tool that we used (ConfTool) was in hindsight not the best tool as it turned out to be very difficult to find certain presentations outside of the schedule. It also lacked an overview of participants to browse.

Recommendations for the future

We hope that we set a precedent and that our conference is the first of many hybrid EAHIL events. We realize that for the biannual workshop events this will be much more challenging. Presenting a hybrid workshop or CEC is very challenging for presenters as it is virtually impossible to entertain both an in person and an online audience. We advise organizers of future EAHIL conferences to plan an in person and virtual event from the start, allowing participants to decide later in the process whether they present in person or not.



Fig. 2. *Members of the Local Organising Committee of EAHIL 2022 Rotterdam.*