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First 15-minute rapid test for large-scale events trialled at the Austria Center Vienna: Covid-19 pilot project involves 3,000 students from the Vienna University of Economics and Business

Take a coronavirus swab just before the event starts and get the results back within 15 minutes? What seemed utterly unrealistic only a few months ago is now possible – thanks to the pace of developments in rapid testing. Earlier today, the Austria Center Vienna become the first venue in Europe to trial a major pilot project, in collaboration with the Vienna University of Economics and Business. Over the course of today and tomorrow, a total of 3,000 people attending lectures to kick off the academic year will be tested using a new antigen rapid testing technique. The insights gained could soon be put to work for the benefit of the whole event industry.

The congress and event industry has been particularly hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic – over the past few months at the Austria Center Vienna alone, around 50 events have either been postponed or cancelled. The direct impacts on Vienna as a congress destination have been catastrophic, as in a normal year the international events held at the Austria Center Vienna have an induced economic impact of between EUR 400 and 500 million. “Through the rapid test pilot project we want to do our bit to ensure that events which meet the highest possible safety standards can be held in Vienna in future. We are very grateful to the students of the Vienna University of Economics and Business for their support in this venture,” said Managing Director Susanne Baumann-Söllner “It is extremely important for us to give the new intake a face-to-face start to university life, while also providing a safe environment for students and faculty members. Which is why we were more than happy to make the most of the opportunities opened up by these rapid tests,” explained Vienna University of Economics and Business Rector Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger.

Test results in just a few minutes with no lab analysis needed

Until now, testing all participants at large-scale events has posed a number of major challenges: the largest of these is the time factor, as at least a few hours pass between the time the swabs or gargle samples are delivered and the results come back from the lab. The Austrian pharmaceutical products wholesaler Alpstar has now brought the NADAL® COVID-19 Ag Rapid Test from German manufacturer nal von minden to the Austrian market, a system which delivers clear results in a matter of minutes. Highly accurate and sensitive, it also stands out for its outstanding ease of operation. In the pilot project, throat swabs are taken by medics from the Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund before the test is performed in a similar way to a pregnancy test, with a number of droplets containing the sample applied to a test cassette before the results are displayed on a chemical strip.

Test lanes for students before lectures

Traditionally, the first lecture for the popular business administration course at the Vienna University of Economics and Business is held in Hall A at the Austria Center Vienna. “We want to give first-semester students the chance to experience the flair of university learning at a large-scale kick off event once again this year, but also in compliance with strict hygiene standards,” Hanappi-Egger

said. For the introductory business administration lecture, the students are split into two groups with around 1,000 participants in each. “To ensure that testing takes as little time as possible, we have set up numerous lanes on the covered main square outside the venue. Once the swab has been taken by a medical professional, students can complete most of the remaining steps in just a few minutes on their own and enter the building right away if they produce a negative result,” said Baumann-Söllner. Tests are completely anonymous. The congress center is covering the majority of the costs of the pilot project with support from the university.

Important insights for the event industry and universities

As the pilot project takes the Austria Center Vienna into uncharted territory internationally, the eyes of the global industry are on Vienna. It is hoped that the project will deliver practical insights into important issues such as basic organisational matters, the amount of participants’ time it takes and the costs for rapid tests at large-scale events. “At present, we can see that the industry is tentatively getting back on its feet, albeit at a highly regional level. So that large-scale international events can return to Vienna in the medium term, organisers need to have a high level of trust in the measures that have been put in place. No hygiene plan or testing procedure can provide full protection from Covid-19. But we all firmly believe that rapid tests represent a major step in the right direction and could quickly go on to become the new standard. We want this pilot project to show the industry what new options are available and provide targeted support for organisers,” Baumann-Söllner concluded. The tests, and above all the results, are also very important for the university sector: “Our sample of more than 1,000 students per lecture is so large that it will deliver actionable insights from a risk assessment point of view for ongoing operations at the university in the next semester,” Hanappi-Egger added.

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