



**Twinning for a European Consortium of Rectal Cancer
Research Institutions through Stepping up Scientific,
Technological and Innovation Excellence of IORS**



Funded by
the European Union

Project number: 101079217



INSTITUT ZA ONKOLOGIJU
I RADIOLOGIJU SRBIJE



Work Package No: 3

Deliverable No: D3.3

**Deliverable Name: Final report of staff exchanges, expert visits to IORS, and
research proposals submitted**

Type: R – Document, report

Dissemination Level: PU - public

Due Date, August 31, 2025

Final Version Date: August 31, 2025

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The main goal of WP3 was to establish knowledge exchange between participating institutions by organizing research and administrative staff exchanges, expert visits to IORS, and preparation and submission of research proposals.

The knowledge exchange between participating institutions was based on six pillars:

1. Research and administrative staff exchanges
2. Expert visits to IORS
3. Training on omics data analysis
4. Workshops on proposal writing, omics approaches, and skills required for careers in academia/industry
5. Summer school on clinical applications of liquid biopsies
6. Preparation and submission of research proposals

During the STEPUPIORS project, **5 visits of IORS staff to partner institutions** and **5 expert visits of partner institution staff** to IORS were organized.

The exchange of scientific and administrative expertise was designed to benefit all the partners. IORS acquired access to advanced analysis methods and efficient research management practices, whereas the leading institutions were able to fully exploit the potential offered by the rectal cancer biobank samples by integrating the omics datasets with clinicopathological information. The staff exchange involved training of IORS visiting scientists in methods that are part of the research component of the current proposal and additional approaches that could be of use in future collaborations. The leading institutions also redefined their practices and approaches in interaction with IORS visitors, according to identified issues made visible while detailed preparation for the training visits. The invested discussions during all these visits opened new avenues of research, advancing science and management in all participating institutions. Thus, the knowledge and experience exchange were bidirectional in a highly functional way.

1. Research and administrative staff exchanges

IORs scientists and administrative personnel visited the grant management offices of partner institutions and obtained direct experience on its operating procedures. In addition, senior scientists and administrative personnel from partner institutions visited IORS to assist in the foundation of the grant management office developed during WP5.

1.1. IORS visit to BRFAA

STEPUPIORS project participants Dr Ana Djuric, Dr Marko Radulovic, Aleksandra Stanojevic, Dr Mladen Marinkovic and Dr Milena Cavic went on a training [visit to the partner institution Biomedical Research Foundation Academy of Athens \(BRFAA\)](#) in Athens, Greece, in order to gain knowledge in the field of project management, in the period from 05-06.12.2022. On 06.12.2022. they visited the company that deals with project management, Exelixis Research Management & Communication, Athens, Greece. During the visit, they attended a [training on writing and project management](#). Research facilities of BRFAA were also visited with and emphasis on CyTOF methodology not available at IORS.

1.2. IORS visit to FRCB-IDIBAPS

STEPUPIORS project participants Dr Ana Djuric, Dr Marko Radulovic, Dr Snezana Bjelogrljic, Dr Mladen Marinkovic, Aleksandra Stanojevic and Dr Milena Cavic went on a [training visit to the partner institution August Pi i Sunyer Biomedical Research Institute \(FRCB-IDIBAPS\)](#) in Barcelona, Spain in order to gain knowledge in the field of project management, in the period from 10-11.01.2023. and biobanking 11-12.01.2023.

1.3. IORS visit to NKI-AVL

STEPUPIORS project participants Dr Milena Cavic, Dr Suzana Stojanovic-Rundic, Dr Ana Djuric, Dr Radmila Jankovic, Dr Marija Djordjic Crnogorac, Dr Miljana Tanic and Dr Marko Radulovic went to a [training visit to the partner institution the Netherlands Cancer Institute Antoni van Leeuwenhoek Hospital \(NKI AVL\)](#) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, to get familiar with the overall organization of the NKI AVL as a research and healthcare centre. Dr Milena Cavic, Dr Ana Djuric and Dr Marko Radulovic participated in the presentation of project management activities of the NKI AVL in order to gain knowledge and practical skills in the field of project management. The visit took place in the period February 13-14, 2023. and was hosted and organized by Dr Remond Fijneman from NKI AVL.

1.4. IORS visit to NKI-AVL

Milena Cavic performed a [strategic training visit](#) at the Netherlands Cancer Institute – Antoni van Leeuwenhoekziekenhuis (NKI AVL), Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in the period of December 06-09, 2023. The visit was focused on scientific activities concerning methods for ctDNA analysis of cancer patients' samples and project management, exploring various aspects necessary for the implementation of the STEPUPIORS project, within work packages WP2, WP3 and WP5. The training was hosted by Dr Remond Fijneman from the Department for Pathology, Translational Gastrointestinal Oncology group, with contribution from various NKI AVL sectors.

During the visit, two external meetings were scheduled for December 07 and 08, 2023, respectively. The first meeting was held with the Dutch Cancer Society representatives (KWF Dutch Cancer Society) from Amsterdam, which provides support for Dutch researchers in applications for clinical, translational and basic science projects in the field of oncology. The second was focused on exploring the new health information system of the Netherlands – Health-Research Infrastructure (Health-RI Data Driven Health & Life Sciences) based in Utrecht, which is the new center of the Dutch health care system digitization.

New project applications were strategically planned during the visit and are expected in 2024 and 2025.

1.5. IORS and NKI-AVL visit to FRCB-IDIBAPS

STEPUPIORS participants Ana Đurić and Milena Čavić from the IORS and Remond Fijneman from the NKI-AVL [visited the partner institution FRCB-IDIBAPS](#) and met with hosts Sergi Castellvi-Bel and Teresa Botta-Orfila on November 25, 2024, in Barcelona.

Experiences in biobank database management were exchanged, discussing key aspects related to annotating data for multiple samples from donors with oncological diseases under clinical follow-up. This allowed us to delve into highly relevant details and continue improving the biobanking processes in both institutions, which is a great step forward in strengthening data management and fostering collaboration in the biomedical field. Potential new collaborations and grant applications in the field of colorectal cancer biomarkers research were explored with FRCB-IDIBAPS and Hospital Clínic de Barcelona scientists Jordi Camps and Meritxell Gironella.

2. Expert visits to IORS

2.1 BRFAA visit to IORS

During the [expert visit of BRFAA staff to IORS](#) on November 28, 2022, Dr Zoidakis and Dr Ilioudis got familiar with the organization of work within the following laboratories: Laboratory for Molecular Genetics, Laboratory for Experimental Pharmacology, Laboratory for Immunology, Laboratory for Radiobiology and Experimental Oncology and Department of Genetic Counselling for Hereditary Cancers, which represent smaller organizational units of the Department of Experimental Oncology. Project participants from IORS also presented the facilities of the Department of Radiation Oncology. Dr Zoidakis, as a senior scientist, and Dr Ilioudis, as a project manager, were informed about the development of the research management office (RMO) at IORS, which represents the deliverable D5.1 within WP5.

2.2. FRCB-IDIBAPS visit to IORS

Research and project management staff from IDIBAPS, performed an [expert visit to IORS](#) on November 30, 2022, during the kick-off meeting period. During the visit, Dr Sergi Castellví-Bel, Dr Işıl Tekeli and Dr Ruth Conesa got acquainted with the facilities and human resources of the Department of Experimental Oncology and the Department of Radiation Oncology. During the visit to IORS, Dr Castellví-Bel, Dr Tekeli and Dr Conesa got familiar with the organization of work within the following laboratories: Laboratory for Molecular Genetics, Laboratory for Experimental Pharmacology, Laboratory for Immunology, Laboratory for Radiobiology and Experimental Oncology and Department of Genetic Counseling for Hereditary Cancers, which represent smaller organizational units of the Department of Experimental Oncology. Project participants from IORS also presented the facilities of the Department of Radiation Oncology. The visit continued with a hands-on session on project management transferring knowledge from the European & International Projects Pre- and Post-award Projects Management Office of IDIBAPS to IORS staff. Dr Castellví-Bel, as a senior scientist, and Dr Tekeli and Dr Conesa as project managers were informed about the development of the research management office (RMO) at IORS, which represents the deliverable D5.1 within WP5.

2.3. BRFAA visit to IORS

[STEPUPIORS PI from BRFAA Dr Ieronymos Zoidakis, visited IORS](#) on June 07, 2024, for a second regular expert partner visit. During the visit, Dr Zoidakis got acquainted with the newly acquired equipment and biobanking facilities of the Department of Experimental Oncology. The visit was hosted by Dr Ana Đurić, Dr Marko Radulović and Aleksandra Stanojević.

2.4. FRCB-IDIBAPS visit to IORS

Biobanking and research staff from [FRCB-IDIBAPS performed an expert visit to IORS](#) on August 29, 2025, during the Final project meeting period. During the visit, Dr Teresa Botta and Judith Sabath from FRCB-IDIBAPS Biobank got acquainted with the challenges and achievements of the first Rectal Cancer Biobank at IORS, established within STEPUPIORS. Also, the IORS staff introduced colleagues from FRCB-IDIBAPS to facilities and human resources at the Department of Experimental Oncology. They got familiar with the organization of research work within the following laboratories: Laboratory for Molecular Genetics, Laboratory for Experimental Pharmacology, Laboratory for Immunology, Laboratory for Radiobiology and Experimental Oncology, and Department of Genetic Counselling for Hereditary Cancers, which represent smaller organizational units of the Department of Experimental Oncology. During the visit, PhD student Xavi Dominguez was introduced to *in vitro* and *ex vivo* studies at IORS.

2.5. NKI-AVL visit to IORS

Research and clinical staff from [NKI-AVL performed an expert visit to IORS](#) on August 29, 2025, during the Final project meeting period. During the visit, STEPUPIORS PI dr Remond Fijneman and dr Niels Kok from NKI-AVL visited the Clinic for radiological oncology and diagnostics, the Clinic for oncological surgery and the Clinic for medical oncology and got acquainted with the structure and organization of IORS as a national cancer healthcare centre. Also, the IORS staff introduced PhD students Denise van Steijn and Renske de Wit from NKI-AVL to facilities and human resources at the Department of Experimental Oncology. They got familiar with the organization of research work within the following laboratories: Laboratory for Molecular Genetics, Laboratory for Experimental Pharmacology, Laboratory for Immunology, Laboratory for Radiobiology and Experimental Oncology, and Department of Genetic Counselling for Hereditary Cancers, which represent smaller organizational units of the Department of Experimental Oncology. During the visit, Denise van Steijn and Renske de Wit were introduced to *in vitro* and *ex vivo* studies at IORS.

Detailed information on all training events related to research and management performed in the framework of the project and corresponding material are available on the project website in the [Training section](#).

3. Submitted proposals

During the project, 17 joint project proposals were submitted of which 2 were funded:

- 3 HORIZON WIDERA calls (HORIZON-WIDERA-2023-ACCESS-05-01, HORIZON-WIDERA-2023-ACCESS-07, HORIZON-WIDERA-2024-TALENTS-03-01) (**1 as IORS as coordinator**)
- 1 HORIZON-MSCA Doctoral Networks (HORIZON-MSCA-2022-DN-01-01)
- 1 HORIZON-MSCA Staff Exchange (HORIZON-MSCA-2023-SE-01) – **funded**
- 1 HORIZON-JU-IHI (HORIZON-JU-IHI-2024-07-02-singe-stage)
- 1 NIH project (NIH_PAR-25-083)
- 1 Cancer Grant Challenges 2025
- 1 European Union Prize for Citizen Science Call 2025
- 3 National Fund Republic of Serbia (Program IDEJE 2024) (**1 as IORS as coordinator**)
- 5 COST actions – **1 funded**

The consortium sustainability was ensured by participation in two new funded programs, [EXPAND-EV MSCA Staff Exchange](#) and [COST Action Snoopy - CA23111](#), along with new joint applications which are currently under review or under preparation.