

In-Person First, Not In-Person Only

Reflections on Remote Participation through the case of ICCC'25 Watch Party

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Abstract

This paper presents the outcomes and reflections from the ICCC'25 Watch Party initiative, a lightweight and community-driven effort to include remote participants during the 16th International Conference on Computational Creativity (ICCC'25) taking place in Campinas, Brazil, from 23rd to 27th June. The conference was initially organised exclusively with in-person attendance in mind, but, similarly to previous years, the sessions were streamed online. We describe the background and motivation for this initiative, its structure, lessons learned from organising and from feedback collected through a questionnaire, and suggestions for possible future low-cost hybrid strategies.

Introduction

The 16th International Conference on Computational Creativity (ICCC'25)¹ was held in Campinas, Brazil, from 23rd to 27th June. Although the conference was organised with an exclusive focus on in-person attendance, it followed the tradition of previous years by streaming the sessions online. Due to several external factors, extra remote adaptations were necessary in this edition to accommodate several people who were unable to attend in person.

One of those adaptations designed to improve the experience of remote attendees was actually initiated by the community itself rather than being officially organised by the conference organisers. Building upon the streaming infrastructure already planned to be provided, the ICCC'25 Watch Party was proposed as an informal and low-effort initiative to encourage engagement among those who could not attend in person. Participants gathered on the ACC Discord server to co-watch sessions, share impressions, and stay connected with the broader community in real-time.

This report presents the outcomes and reflections from the ICCC'25 Watch Party initiative. It aims to document the structure of the initiative, reflect on its execution, and evaluate its impact through feedback collected via a post-event questionnaire. It also proposes lightweight strategies for future iterations of ICCC and similar conferences to support meaningful remote engagement.

We argue that, while the specific obstacles that justified remote engagement were more visible this year, they are

systemic and recur annually. Yet, the existing fear that remote and decentralised models might weaken in-person attendance – which we believe may be misguided – could in fact be contributing to disengagement within the community. Thoughtfully designed solutions following the principle of **In-Person First, Not In-Person Only** could support inclusion without undermining onsite attendance, both fostering continuity and strengthening the ICCC community.

The report is structured as follows: it first contextualizes remote and hybrid conferences and provides the background and implementation of the Watch Party initiative. It next presents the survey findings and discusses their implications, before concluding with practical suggestions for future remote participation in ICCC.

Background, History and Context

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated experimentation with alternative conference formats. Since then, terms such as in-person, remote, hybrid, alternate, and decentralised have become common in discussions about event organisation. In-person events bring everyone to the same physical location, which usually makes networking and informal interaction easier, but they exclude people who cannot travel. Remote events move everything online, making participation cheaper and more accessible, though often at the cost of weaker social interaction and engagement. Hybrid events combine both modes at the same time, offering flexibility but also creating extra coordination work and sometimes uneven experiences between onsite and online participants. Alternate formats switch between modes across editions or sessions, which helps balance access and the in-person experience, but can disrupt continuity from one year to the next. Decentralised formats use multiple local hubs connected to a shared event, which can support local participation and community building, but are harder to organise consistently.

Prior work on hybrid conferences [Bajpai et al., 2022] recommends planning hybrid participation from the start, ensuring equal access to content and interaction, assigning dedicated support roles, accommodating timezone differences, using simple platforms, rethinking social activities for both audiences, and offering differentiated pricing. Despite these guidelines, we suggest that implementing a fully hybrid model can significantly increase the organisational complexity of the conference. Yet, a more feasible alterna-

¹<https://computationalcreativity.net/iccc25/>

tive can perhaps be officially supporting independent parallel remote events and providing low-effort mechanisms and incentives for the community to propose and run distributed satellite hubs capable of accommodating those unable to attend in person, increasing attendance and continued engagement, without compromising organisational manageability.

Since ICCC'21, the ACC General Assembly² has periodically discussed decentralised, remote, and hybrid versions of ICCC. Supporters have emphasised accessibility and environmental benefits [Pease and Pease, 2023], while others have warned that such formats could weaken in-person attendance and community cohesion. None of these proposals has moved beyond discussion, perhaps because the fully remote editions of 2020 and 2021, organised in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, already illustrated the organisational burden and the disadvantages of non-standard formats.

ICCC'25 took place in Brazil under difficult conditions for attendance, including funding cuts, travel constraints, and competing conferences. New institutional travel policies excluded ICCC from funding eligibility in some cases, and the political climate further complicated international travel. Most importantly, the lack of remote options posed an additional challenge for maintaining ACC membership continuity. As the need for remote participation became more visible, several online accommodations were introduced late, but they were not always clearly communicated and did not fully support asynchronous participation. Thus, in parallel, a community-led Watch Party emerged through the ACC Discord server. The idea was first raised during a session of the CC Reading Group³, a monthly community-led discussion held on the ACC Discord server. The first written mention of the proposal appeared on 27/05/2025 on ACC Discord and received engagement from multiple members of the community. One member also added to their support:

For future years, it would be fantastic to actually have an online parallel conference, as many people will have issues travelling, for various reasons... I know hybrid is really hard to organise, and at the same time it's partly becoming something that people are surprised not to see offered ... in current times it has become more important than ever, and would be a great way to include people who aren't able to travel in person.

An initial message requesting permission to proceed with the event was sent to the ICCC'25 organisers on 19/06/2025. The response received on 21/06/2025 granted provisional support but with the following statement:

This year has been very special. I think, under the circumstances, having a parallel online event may reduce the worst of the damage to the community. But I definitely do not think it is a good alternative to having a proper conference, and I do not think it is something we should encourage in the future.

²Witnessed by the authors *in loco*. Attempts to access the minutes of recent ACC General Assembly meetings to substantiate these claims were unfruitful.

³https://cs.uwaterloo.ca/~browndg/CC_reading_group/index.shtml

This message reflects the fear that remote participation might undermine the conference. Yet, even though these barriers were more visible in 2025, because they affected more European and North American members of the community, we believe they are systemic and recur every year, affecting different people in different ways. Because conference travel is still heavily shaped by geography, funding, and visa constraints, the current model keeps favouring participants from Europe and North America while leaving others systematically underrepresented. In current times, an in-person-only model can feel exclusionary, even elitist, and may be perceived as a threat: attend in person or do not participate at all. For those reasons, we believe that, rather than weakening the conference, balanced remote and decentralised options may help preserve continuity, increase inclusion, and strengthen long-term community engagement.

Watch Party Event

The ICCC'25 Watch Party was conceived as a lightweight, community-driven way to support those unable to travel, while preserving an in-person-first conference model. Rather than a fully hybrid redesign, it relied on a small online space in the ACC Discord, with no expectation of live interaction with speakers and only limited promotional support. The aim was to enable informal co-watching and peer discussion without competing with physical attendance.

The proposal was based on the idea that real-time interaction and synchronous viewing could improve engagement, while a Discord-based format would keep the logistical burden low. The event was also used to test whether such remote initiatives could impact onsite attendance.

Approved shortly before the conference, the Watch Party was launched during the opening session and attracted a small but active group on the first day. Participation dropped after that, possibly due to time-zone differences, the main organiser's inability to remain present to help sustain engagement, and the overlap with other relevant conferences taking place at the same time. While this may be interpreted as evidence that low-effort remote approaches are not useful, we believe it is too early to draw that conclusion. Instead, we take these results as guidance for how the concept might be refined and made more effective in future iterations.

Questionnaire

The data presented in this report was collected through a survey distributed during and after ICCC'25. The form was open for several months to allow asynchronous contributions, thereby capturing both real-time and retrospective perspectives. It is important to note that these results are likely affected by self-selection bias, as respondents who attended the party or held stronger views may have been more likely to answer. The aggregated analytics are available online⁴, and the Figures referred throughout the text are relative to Annex I.

Attendance to ICCC'25: Based on the survey, **69.2%** of the 13 respondents (9 individuals) **did not attend ICCC'25**

⁴PDF of questionnaire results

in person (Figure I.1). The most common reasons were “*time or conflicting obligations*” (6 of the 9 non-attendees) and “*financial constraints*” (5 respondents). Other reasons, shown in Figure I.2, included: paper not accepted, sustainability concerns, or visa issues (2 each), as well as family-related constraints (1) and no interest in attending in person (1). Notably, none selected “*I prefer to follow remotely*”, “*I don’t usually travel to conferences*”, or “*health issues*”⁵.

Regarding the ICCC’25 Watch Party, 7 of 12 respondents (58.3%) said they attended or planned to attend, while 5 (41.7%) did not. Among those who did not attend, the main reason was attending the conference in person (4 of 6 responses), followed by time-zone constraints or conflicting obligations (2 of 6). Less frequent reasons, each mentioned once, were lack of interest, difficulty engaging online, and uncertainty about how to participate. As shown in Figure I.4, none cited a lack of awareness of the initiative, a preference for following independently, or discomfort using Discord.

Feedback about ICCC25 Watch Party: Participants highlighted several positive aspects of the Watch Party: the small group size (4–5 participants) created a casual atmosphere that encouraged open discussion; real-time chat fostered a sense of community; and the YouTube stream was seen as clear, high-quality, and unobtrusive, with one participant suggesting that this event could promote people to subscribe to the ACC YouTube channel.

They also identified several limitations: switching between YouTube and Discord was inconvenient and some preferred a unified platform; engagement was sometimes low, which discouraged participation when the space was empty; the purpose of the Watch Party were not always clear, suggesting a need for integration into the main program; time-zone differences prevented some people from joining; and informal interactions were missed, with one suggestion being remote social spaces such as virtual coffee breaks.

Regarding the platform used (Figure I.5), out of 10 people who answered a question related to this topic, **6 said Discord was a good option**, with options like GatherTown and Zoom coming after with 3 votes each.

Participants were asked how remote participation could be improved in future conferences, for example, through local watch parties, interactive Q&A, or breakout sessions. The responses showed interest in local physical watch parties or regional hubs, especially for those unable to travel internationally; interactive formats such as breakout sessions or structured prompts; informal voice-based spaces similar to GatherTown; remote chairs or mechanisms for live questions; open online Q&A; and, despite the added complexity, broader support for hybrid formats.

Finally, when asked whether the Watch Party should continue in future ICCC editions (Figure I.6), the vast majority of respondents – 11 participants out of 13 – answered affirmatively. Only one respondent replied “No” and another “Not sure”; notably, both attended ICCC’25 in person. We

⁵Before the conference, however, a separate request was posted in the Computational Creativity Discord community by someone seeking remote access due to health constraints.

did not collect reasons for these answers, so we don’t know the reasoning behind these negative answers.

Paper Submission: Before launching the survey, we hypothesised that having a paper accepted at ICCC would strongly influence participants’ decisions to attend in person, both because the conference offered no explicit remote option for authors and because many institutions require acceptance for travel funding. To explore this, we asked whether respondents had submitted a paper to ICCC’25. As shown in Figure I.7, responses were nearly evenly split: 53.8% (7 of 13) had submitted a paper, while 46.2% (6 of 13) had not.

Among those who did not submit a paper, the reasons were varied: 2 respondents mentioned financial constraints, one of them explicitly said they could not afford to attend and therefore chose not to submit because there was no remote option; another respondent said they did not yet have a project ready and did not see the conference as relevant at that stage; the final respondent said they lacked motivation to submit without the possibility of attending in person, suggesting that their decision was already tied to physical attendance. As shown in Figure I.8, motivations for submission were diverse, but 77% of those who submitted a paper said that attending in person was at least part of their motivation, and 33% said it was their primary motivation. Only one respondent said physical attendance was not a motivating factor. This suggests that in-person attendance remains a major driver of paper submission, rather than the reverse.⁶ This fact may reduce motivation to submit among those who do not see a path to attending in person, and an in-person-only model may even remove any additional incentive to submit. Overall, while these answers point to a mix of practical and contextual barriers, many beyond the conference organisers’ control, the lack of remote options, which is within the organisers’ control, can become an obstacle to submissions.

For the question “If you submitted a paper, was it accepted?”, 7 of 9 respondents (77.8%) said yes, and 2 (22.2%) said no. While this suggests a relatively high acceptance rate among respondents, the sample is too small to infer the overall conference acceptance rate, and the result is very likely to have also been affected by self-selection bias. We previously saw that paper rejection can block in-person attendance, then it is plausible to assume that paper acceptance functions more as a way to secure funding and make attendance possible rather than motivate in-person attendance. Yet, acceptance does not guarantee in-person attendance, since some institutions do not fund travel to C-rated conferences. In those cases, even after acceptance, in-person-only models can once again become a bottleneck for participation, even for high-quality work that has been accepted.

The data suggest that remote presentation options would not discourage those already planning to attend in person, since many respondents were already motivated to submit by their intention to attend. On the contrary, such options could attract additional submissions from people unable to travel (for all kinds of reasons: chronic health problems, family re-

⁶This may be only relevant while the conference remains rated C in the CORE ranking; if those conditions change, new data and conclusions may be needed.

sponsibilities, etc.) while leaving the motivations of onsite attendees largely unchanged. This could increase submission volume, especially from regions that are systematically underrepresented in ICCC, such as Africa, West and East Asia, and South America, without undermining the existing incentive structure.

Impact of Remote Components: Lastly, we explicitly asked respondents how remote components would affect their participation decisions. Although these answers are likely affected once again by self-selection bias, they still provide an initial indication that remote formats do not necessarily discourage physical attendance.

As shown in Figure I.9, 41.7% of respondents said they would have been more likely to submit a paper if they had known about a remote component in advance, while half said it would make no difference and none said it would make them less likely to submit. This suggests that remote participation has a positive or neutral effect on submission decisions. Figure I.10 shows that 66.7% of respondents said remote components would have no influence on their decision to attend ICCC in person. Only 16.7% said they would be less likely to attend, and another 16.7% were unsure. Taken together, these results are consistent with the responses to the similar questions about remote components becoming a permanent feature of ICCC, in Figure I.13 and Figure I.14.

Half of the participants had already watched ICCC talks live in previous years, and another quarter had watched selected recordings (Figure I.11), suggesting that remote passive watching is already familiar to much of the community, which may explain why the Watch Party itself appears to have had limited influence on streaming viewing: while most respondents were unsure, only 8.3% said the event was the main reason they watched the sessions (Figure I.12). Yet, Figure I.15 shows that **84.6%** of respondents believe that a regular online Watch Party would **increase their engagement** with ICCC and the Computational Creativity community in general. Only one respondent disagreed and one was uncertain. This indicates strong community support for continued offering of remote active parallel participation.

Open Ended Question: The final survey question was open-ended, and the 9 responses reflected a broad range of views: 1) some respondents stressed that participation is often limited by factors beyond individual control, such as funding, visa restrictions, or “weak passports,” which can even lead to paper withdrawals when no remote option is available. This raises concerns about the gap between ICCC’s stated commitment to welcoming participants from all over the world and the practical barriers that still limit access, as well as about broader ACC membership continuity [Association for Computational Creativity, 2017]. 2) Some other respondents emphasised the importance of early communication about remote options, even if they are only offered on demand, while other responses, paradoxically suggested that timely communication could instead slightly discourage in-person attendance. 3) Some respondents still highlighted the value of in-person participation, especially for networking and community building, and expressed con-

cern that hybrid formats could increase organisational burden or reduce the quality of the conference experience. 4) Finally, several respondents supported stronger remoteisation or full hybridisation, suggesting that exciting online offerings could expand reach and inclusivity, with some even supporting ICCC “formally [becoming] a hybrid conference”.

Overall, these findings show both support for and reservations about remote and hybrid components. While such formats may improve inclusivity and engagement, some fear they could weaken the in-person experience and increase organisational burden. At the same time, many people still face barriers beyond their control that prevent them from attending in person. In this context, several respondents suggested that initiatives like the Watch Party ICCC’25 could strengthen long-term involvement with ICCC and the broader Computational Creativity community.

Discussion and Proposed Guidelines

This preliminary initiative explored the possibility of *remoteisation* in ICCC, but the available data are still limited. As participation was voluntary, the feedback may reflect more active or positively engaged members, and may not capture the views of less engaged participants. Future assessments are necessary and should aim for more representative input.

Given these findings, we propose an **In-Person First, Not In-Person Only** principle. This approach preserves the advantages of an in-person conference while still allowing lightweight and meaningful remote participation. It aims at avoiding the complexity of a fully hybrid or remote-first model, while keeping the event accessible and engaging to those unable to attend physically.

As an **in-person first** event, ICCC would: promote in-person presentations, keep the main schedule fixed to in-person attendance; avoid adapting the program to remote time zones; not require real-time interaction from remote viewers; keep presentations optimised for on-site engagement; handle catering and social events in the usual way.

As a **not in-person only** event, ICCC should also: continue providing a live stream of main sessions; appoint a *Chair for Remote Attendance*; measure the risk of mass non-attendance and plan for it; provide a remote registration option, allowing members to remain formally engaged with ACC, while helping organisers manage catering and local logistics; offer remote presentation options and communicate them clearly and early; consider remote-friendly workshop formats; encourage community-led satellite events, such as local or online watch parties; optionally, support these initiatives through incentives or recognition; collect feedback during and after the conference. Organisers of satellite events should clearly identify them as ICCC-affiliated, include opportunities for discussion and social interaction, and consider features such as dedicated hosts, shared question collection, and deferred watch parties for different time zones.

Given the current global and political landscape, this is a timely opportunity to explore alternative conference models using new technologies to bring the community closer together, thus embodying the true spirit of Computational Creativity —pioneering inclusive, flexible, and forward-looking ways to foster collaboration and creativity worldwide.

Acknowledgments

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GenAI Disclosure

Portions of this report were prepared with the assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT (v2, 2025), used as a writing and editing aid. The model was employed to improve clarity, revise drafts for academic tone and coherence, and format content into LaTeX where appropriate. All factual content, structure, and final decisions reflect the author's original intent and judgment.

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Annex I: Survey Results Figures

Are you attending ICCCC25 in-person?

13 responses

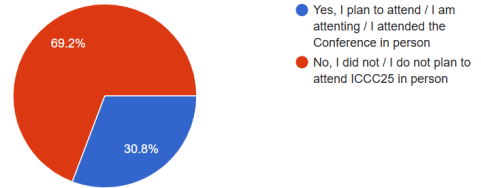


Figure 1: In-person attendance at ICCCC'25 of those who responded to the survey.

If no, what are the reasons? (select all that apply)

9 responses

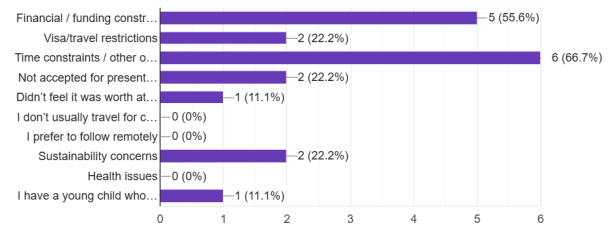


Figure 2: Reasons for not attending ICCCC'25 in person, as reported by survey respondents.

Are you attending the online ICCCC25 watch party?

12 responses

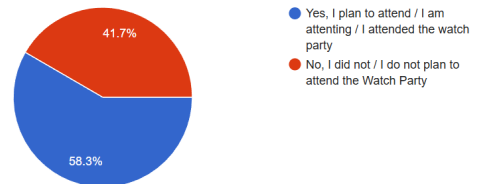


Figure 3: Responses to the question regarding online ICCCC'25 watch party attendance.

If no, what are the reasons? (select all that apply)

6 responses

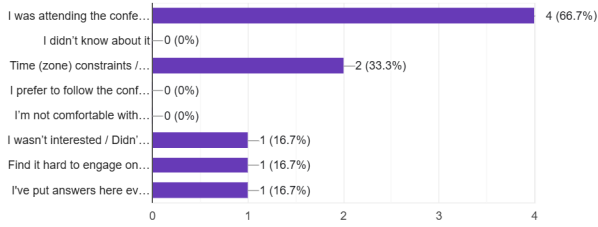


Figure 4: Reasons for not attending the Watch Party

If you submitted a paper, did you submit primarily to attend in person?

9 responses

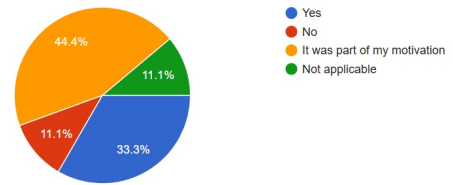


Figure 8: Responses to the question "If you submitted a paper, did you submit primarily to attend in person?"

Are there other platforms you would prefer over Discord?

10 responses

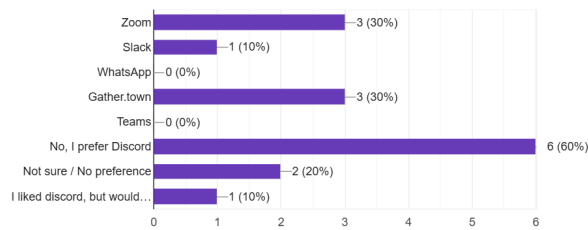


Figure 5: Platform preferences

If you knew priorly that there was a remote component (e.g. Discord watch party), would that have influenced your decision to submit a paper?

12 responses

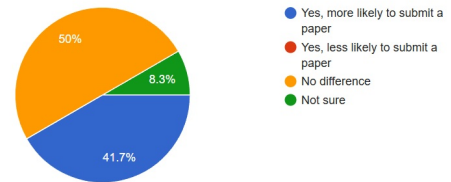


Figure 9: Influence of remote components on the decision to submit a paper.

Would you like the Discord watch party to continue in future years?

13 responses

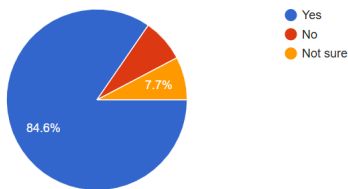


Figure 6: Responses to a new edition of the Watch Party

Did you submit a paper to ICCC'25 this year?

13 responses

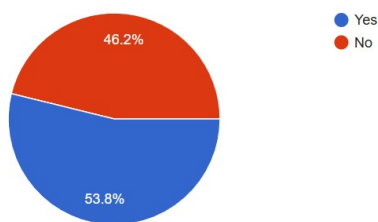


Figure 7: Responses to the question "Did you submit a paper to ICCC'25?"

If you knew priorly that there was a remote component (e.g. Discord watch party), would that have influenced your decision to attend in person?

12 responses

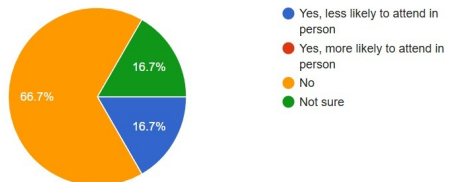


Figure 10: Influence of remote components on the decision to attend in person.

Have you ever watched ICCC conference streamed talks (live or later) before this year?

12 responses

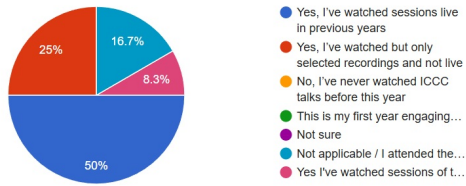


Figure 11: Respondents' previous experience watching ICCC talks online.

Would a regular online Discord watch party increase your engagement with ICCC and the Computational Creativity in general (e.g. collaborating, submitting, reviewing, commenting, presenting...)?

13 responses

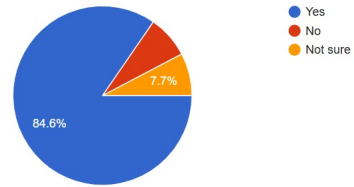


Figure 15: Respondents' views on whether regular Watch Parties would increase engagement with ICCC.

Do you think you would be watching the ICCC talks this year remotely if the Discord watch party didn't exist?

12 responses

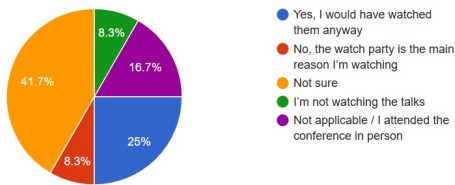


Figure 12: Impact of the Watch Party on respondents' likelihood to watch ICCC talks.

If there were always remote components, would that influence your decision to submit a paper in future years?

12 responses

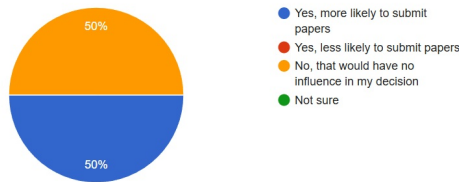


Figure 13: Influence of permanent remote components on future paper submissions.

If there were always remote components, would that influence your decision to attend in person in future years?

12 responses

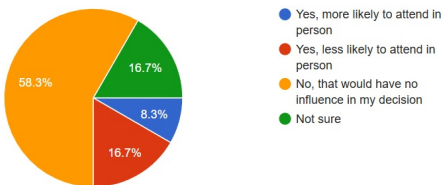


Figure 14: Influence of permanent remote components on future in-person attendance.