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| **Council Working Group on Financial and Human Resources Fifteenth meeting – 11 and 12 January 2022** |  |
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| **English only** |
| Contribution by Australia and Canada | |
| VIRTUAL AND HYBRID MEETINGS | |

**Introduction**

Australia and Canada are pleased to submit this contribution to the ITU Council Working Group on Financial and Human Resources (CWG-FHR) for its discussion and consideration during its 11-12 January 2022 meetings.

Despite ongoing uncertainty of emerging COVID-19 variants and fluid border restrictions, the ITU staff and its members have effectively adapted to virtual meeting platforms and maintained good progression of the organisation’s important work.

The ITU has publicly highlighted the vital role of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which has become more important than ever before in helping countries to utilise digital technologies for teleworking, e-commerce, remote learning and telemedicine. In embracing this spirit, the work of the ITU during the pandemic has set in motion good progress in improving the capacity of communication networks, particularly for least developed countries and regions.

The past 18 months have shown that virtual meeting platforms can provide a platform for the important work of the ITU to continue, allowing access, inclusivity and participation for members, and greater flexibility to accommodate meetings.

However, as we learn to live with the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, it is essential to facilitate flexible and inclusive options for participation in ITU meetings. International travel continues to be problematic, with rapidly changing travel requirements leaving many administrations unable to travel. If not developed carefully, hybrid meetings could create a strong risk that meeting outcomes do not represent a consensus of member states, undermining the entire process.

**Discussions**

Australia and Canada believe there is a need in the ITU to develop procedures, guidelines and rules to facilitate both fully virtual meetings (no physical attendance) and meetings that allow both virtual and in‑person (“hybrid”) participation. The rules for participating in ITU meetings need to be adapted to allow delegates equal representation and the same rights, whether they attend in-person or participate remotely.

Australia and Canada accept virtual platforms can pose some challenges, such as loss of social contact and connectivity, and accommodating many time zones, however this should not preclude the ITU from adapting to virtual and hybrid meetings where possible. Further, it is likely that the use of virtual platforms will continue and evolve well after the pandemic ends as a necessary mode of communicating and doing work. As such, Australia and Canada consider there is an urgent need to develop procedures, rules and guidelines that will help safeguard and progress future work in the ITU.

Australia and Canada are not proposing to replace all ITU events and meetings with a virtual or hybrid format, nor are we seeking to unnecessarily increase the overall number of virtual meetings. We understand the need for physical meetings to take place where face-to-face interaction or voting is required (e.g. PP, WTSA, WTDC, WRC, WCIT and Council) taking into account the ITU’s Constitution and Convention requirements for events and meetings (i.e. the requirement for delegations to be duly accredited and that those physically present are entitled to take decision which include or may include voting). For example, Council Working Groups could be facilitated as hybrid meetings and Inter-regional meetings held as fully virtual.

Australia and Canada propose that the procedures, rules and guidance for virtual and hybrid meetings would support the ITU’s diverse membership. Practical measures should be implemented to support equitable opportunities for participation by all administrations. This could include rotating time zones and providing flexibility in the length of meetings, providing assistance and support to meeting chairs to manage remote participation fairly, and further support in physical meetings to ensure those participating virtually are given the same opportunities to engage in discussions. These and other measures may lessen the burden for regions where members normally participate in virtual meetings in the very early or very late hours of the day, or where international travel remains not an option.

Australia and Canada note the Telecommunication Standardization Advisory Group’s (TSAG) work on the governance and management of e-meetings for the ITU-T, which could be leveraged as a basis for broader consideration within the ITU.

**Proposal**

Australia and Canada propose that the CWG-FHR recommends actions for ITU Council’s consideration that proposes the development of procedures, rules and guidelines, including the appropriate governance and management for, virtual and hybrid meetings. The procedures will allow delegates, whether they participate in-person or virtually, equal footing and without discrimination at meetings. Further, the procedures, rules and guidelines would apply across the ITU, where applicable, noting that each sector will need to take into account their working methods and rules. Where possible and practical, each sector should openly work with all administrations to allow them the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the development of these working methods and rules.

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