

The Advancing MOOCs for Development Initiative

An examination of MOOC usage for professional workforce development outcomes in Colombia, the Philippines, & South Africa

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ADVANCING MOOCS FOR DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

Online courses have the potential to expand quality education and career training worldwide. Yet few people in developing countries access Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), despite the fact that MOOCs are open to the public and often free. Recognizing this unmet potential, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and CourseTalk, the largest source of MOOC reviews, have partnered to determine how online education can best help young adults across the developing world grow successful careers. The initiative is driven by research on MOOC usage in Colombia, the Philippines, and South Africa conducted by the Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) at the University of Washington's Information School with support from IREX, a nonprofit development organization.

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ABSTRACT

The potential of online learning has long afforded the hope of providing quality education to anyone, anywhere in the world. The recent development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) heralded an exciting new breakthrough by providing free academic instruction and professional skills development from the world's leading universities to anyone with the sufficient resources to access the internet. The research in Advancing MOOCs for Development Initiative study was designed to analyze the MOOC landscape in developing countries and to better understand the motivations of MOOC users and afford insights on the advantages and limitations of MOOCs for workforce development outcomes. The key findings of this study challenge commonly held beliefs about MOOC usage in developing countries, defying typical characterizations of how people in resource constrained settings use technology for learning and employment. In fact, some of the findings are so contrary to what has been reported in the U.S. and other developed environments that they raise new questions for further investigation.

KEYWORDS

MOOCs, online education, e-learning, Colombia, Philippines, South Africa, survey, ICTD, ICT4D, employability, workforce development, users, non-users, online learning

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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Executive Summary

The potential of online learning has long afforded the hope of delivering quality education to anyone, anywhere in the world. The recent development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), however, heralded an exciting new breakthrough, offering instruction and professional skills development at the highest academic levels. Suddenly, anyone with the sufficient resources necessary to access the internet could take courses from the world's leading universities, often free of charge.

In January of 2015, through funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), in partnership with IREX, the University of Washington's TASCHA program (Technology & Social Change Group), and CourseTalk, the Advancing MOOCs for Development Initiative (AMDI) was launched. The goals of the Initiative were threefold:

- (1) Collect data on the use of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in developing countries to better understand their potential for improving employment opportunities;
- (2) Raise awareness of MOOCs among policy makers, employers, and the general public; and
- (3) Determine factors that could lead to increased MOOC usage and higher completion rates of online courses.

PREVAILING VIEWS OF THE MOOC LANDSCAPE

Current research on MOOC usage has continually suggested that MOOCs primarily benefit highly educated, typically male, wealthier populations from developed countries.¹ MOOC research in developing economies, however, is still in its infancy. The research gathered in this report, *An examination of MOOC usage for professional workforce development Outcomes in Colombia, the Philippines, & South Africa*, aims to contribute to filling this knowledge gap.

This report hope to illuminate the MOOC landscape in developing countries in order to better understand the motivations of MOOC users, and afford insights on the advantages and limitations of using MOOCs for workforce development outcomes.² To this end, research for this report was collected through an extensive variety of means. Local academic and nonprofit institutions in Colombia, the Philippines, and South Africa collected data from MOOC users and non-users alike, key informant interviews from government agencies and major employers were solicited, and focus groups of MOOC users from each of the three countries in the survey were conducted.

FINDINGS FROM DEVELOPING ECONOMIES MERIT REEXAMINATION OF WHO USES MOOCS AND WHY

Many of the key findings of this study are surprising. They challenge commonly held beliefs about MOOC usage, defying typical characterizations of how people in resource-constrained environments use technology for learning and employment purposes. In fact, some of the findings are so contrary to what has been reported in the United States and other developed environments that they raise questions necessitating further scrutiny.

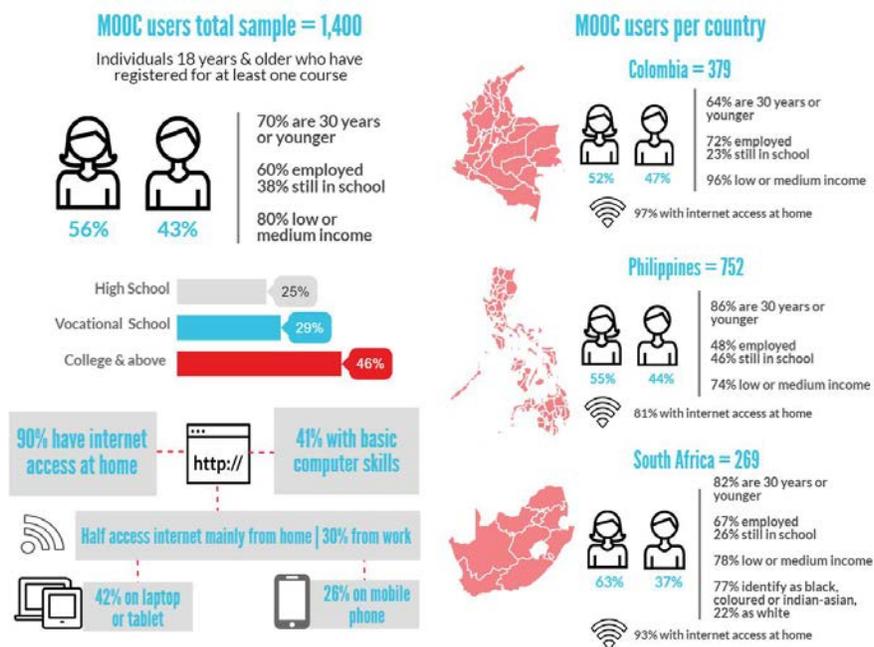
¹ ICEF Monitor, July, 2014 <http://monitor.icef.com/2014/07/who-uses-moocs-and-how/>

² MOOCs for workforce development does not mean specific MOOCs designed for workforce development. It means how MOOCs in general contribute or can contribute to workforce development, as self-defined by users. This includes opportunities for employment, job retention, skills development and training that affords career advancement.

Consider the following for examples...

- Low- and middle-income populations make up 80% of MOOC users, in contrast to wealthier populations reported elsewhere.
- Over 80% of MOOC users only have basic or intermediate level ICT skills, challenging the belief that MOOCs are predominantly taken by people with higher level skills.
- Forty-nine percent of MOOC users received certification in a MOOC class, and another 30% completed a course. This is far above the single-digit rates reported elsewhere.
- Women are more likely than men to complete a MOOC or obtain certification.
- The main motivations of MOOC users were found to be in gaining specific job skills (61%), preparing for additional education (39%), and obtaining professional certification (37%).
- Among non-users, lack of time (50%) was by far the largest barrier to MOOC participation. Lack of computer access (4%) or skills (2%) was not found to be a barrier.

Figure 1: MOOC users surveyed in Colombia, the Philippines, and South Africa³



MOOCS THROUGH THE LENS OF POLICY MAKERS AND EMPLOYERS

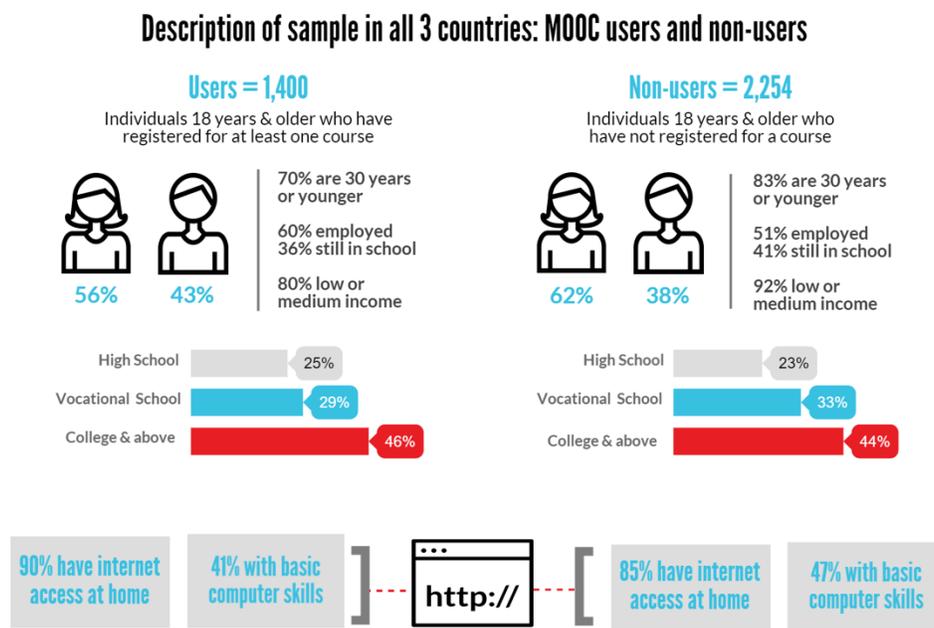
The research in *An Examination of MOOC Usage for Professional Workforce Development Outcomes in Colombia, the Philippines, & South Africa* also examined the perspectives of government agencies, academic institutions, and

³ 41% of MOOC users identified as having basic ICT skills, 40% have intermediate ICT skills, 19% have advanced ICT skills

employers about their awareness and perceptions of MOOCs. The core findings in these domains are of equal interest to policy makers, educators, and business interests. For instance:

- *Employers were generally positive about MOOCs, although they mentioned barriers including the predisposition that in-person or blended learning offers more opportunities to learn practical skills, and a bias against considering a candidate who only has only been certified through MOOCs over concern of quality control.*
- *At varying levels of government, there is general awareness of the potential of using MOOCs to advance workforce development, yet it is highly compartmentalized and not embedded in any national strategy in the countries examined.*
- *Government respondents identified ICT infrastructure and skills as the major barrier to MOOC uptake, a stark contrast to the views of both MOOC users and non-users.*
- *MOOCs offered by government institutions, more than academic institutions, are increasing in prominence and offer the most promise for workforce development outcomes due to the opportunity to link government certification to courses.*

Figure 2: Description of MOOC users and non-users sample in the three countries



WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

This study has revealed a number of flaws associated with the frequently held perception that MOOCs usage is largely inhibited in developing economies by underdeveloped technological infrastructure and reduced income levels. Several significant conclusions merit noteworthy consideration:

- *MOOC users across the three countries overwhelmingly complete MOOCs and obtain certification in MOOC courses.*

- *The socioeconomic profile of MOOC users and non-users reflects the populations typically targeted for youth workforce development strategies and poverty alleviation.*
- *MOOCs represent a viable channel to expand training opportunities for women to gain skills and improve their competitiveness in the labor market, especially in jobs and industries where women are underrepresented.*
- *Employers have generally positive perceptions about MOOCs for advancing or starting careers, but an applicant listing a MOOC course on his/her CV doesn't make a difference in their hiring decisions.*
- *Slow internet speeds and quality of access to technology are obstacles for youth when engaging with MOOCs, which even when free, can incur data and time costs.*
- *Certification is important, but it is a nuanced picture. Most young people in these countries use MOOCs as a means to prepare for professional certification, but it is a means to an end.*

This report affords insight on a number of dynamic factors that surround MOOCs and the audiences they aim to serve. *An Examination of MOOC Usage for Professional Workforce Development Outcomes in Colombia, the Philippines, & South Africa* begins by disclosing how the research in each of the three countries was designed and the methodology behind it. The report then looks at who uses MOOCs in developing economies and for what purposes, before examining the demographics of non-MOOC users and the obstacles to engaging them, from lack of awareness to motivation. Finally, the report looks at government and employer perceptions of MOOCs before offering key recommendations cited above along with steps for addressing remaining challenges.

As with any report with this many variables, including language, income, culture, and infrastructure, there are bound to be assumptions requiring further scrutiny and questions necessitating supplementary investigation. These findings aim to both forward the dialogue on MOOCs and illuminate the ever-changing landscape associated with MOOCs and workforce development.