SCRIPT OF TALK

TITLE:

Who are MOOC Learners?

SPEAKER:

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NARRATION:

We start by asking two questions. Who are the learners in a MOOC? What is their motivation, broadly speaking? An allied and relevant question is: where do they come from?

MOOC is a rapidly emerging development. Data on learner characteristics is still being analysed. In this talk, we will make use of two published studies. One is based on the MOOCs of University pf Pennsylvania which uses Coursera. This university offers a large number of MOOCs and about a fifth of Coursera students last year are thought to have been learners in U Penn courses. The range of topics is wide. The other study is based on the MIT MOOC that made the term MOOC famous. It is an advanced course in electrical engineering which had about 150 000 joiners.

Both these studies are listed in the resources link in the MOOC on MOOC.

MOOC learners are not among the under-educated. Very large proportion of them has at least a bachelor's degree and almost half have a higher degree. Some therefore argue that MOOC is not a good channel to reach the unreached. We will see about that in another talk.

A fair proportion of MOOC learners are young. The proportion of youth is higher when non OECD countries are considered. Males seem to dominate MOOC participation. Further, MOOC is used much more by people who are employed in some way. Students and unemployed or individuals otherwise occupied are present to a lesser level in a MOOC.

Motivation is split almost evenly between "just for fun" and keenness to gain knowledge and skills. If half the joiners are in for fun, does a parameter like completion rate have much meaning here?

Motivation according to U Penn MOOC study is also dependent upon the topic. Business and social science topics seem to attract learners who plan to gain more knowledge or skills. More individuals from developing countries opt for these topics.

We were talking about a study of learners in the U Penn MOOCs on Coursera. We will now consider some information from a study on MIT 6.002x which attracted very significant global media attention. As you can see from the figure, learners came from almost all countries. USA and India were the top two countries in this course, and there were about 150 000 joiners.

In terms of data from an exit survey in the MITx there are some interesting differences. Let us keep in mind that this is an advanced course. There were about a third of joiners who had a bachelor's degree or less. They did not do as well as those that had a doctorate. The course level is so advanced that it did not really matter if a learner had a high school certificate or a bachelor's degree!

For about three fourths of the learners, the interest was to gain new knowledge; or to accept the MOOC as a personal challenge, an opportunity to excel.

Another interesting information is about performance in the light of study as a loner or in collaboration. The data shows that students that had offline collaboration with another student on the same course did better. Although not easy to generalise, this data appears to appeal to most people intuitively.

Taking both the studies together, we could say that a typical MOOC learner is a young male with a reasonable chance of coming from a developing country. If so, gaining new knowledge and skills is a serious motivating factor.

We could use this set of observations to consider if MOOC can be used to improve employability of graduates in tech and allied areas. We need to engineer the infrastructure for MOOC fo0r development. We must also take steps to ensure that more women are enabled to join MOOCs. We are yet to develop an approach to use MOOC for the unreached, the less educated.