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New study on MOOCs in developing countries reveals half of users receive certification

SEATTLE — April 11, 2016 — A [groundbreaking study](#) by University of Washington researchers shows developing world learners use massive open online courses (MOOCs) very differently than their developed world counterparts. (**Download report here:** <http://tascha.uw.edu/publications/an-examination-of-mooc-usage-for-professional-workforce-development-outcomes/>)

The research shows that the low completion rates and homogenous demographics found among users in the United States and similar nations do not hold true worldwide. However, developing countries have their own barriers to online learning to overcome.

Based on surveys of 1,400 MOOC users and 2,250 non-users aged 18 to 35 in **Colombia**, the **Philippines**, and **South Africa**, the study is the first to include multiple MOOC providers in the developing world. It is also the first to analyze individuals not using MOOCs.

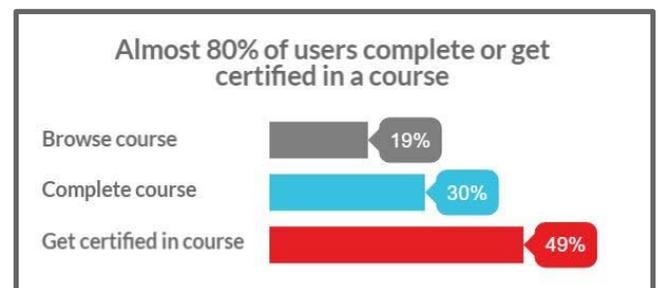
The research was conducted by the [Technology & Social Change Group](#) (TASCHA) at the University of Washington's Information School. It is a central component of the [Advancing MOOCs for Development Initiative](#) launched by the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) (USAID) and [CourseTalk](#), the world's largest source for reviews of online classes. Managed by nonprofit [IREX](#), the initiative aims to harness the power of MOOCs to help young adults across the developing world grow successful careers.

"Many people assumed that in developing countries, MOOCs would only be used by the rich and well-educated," said lead researcher Maria Garrido, Research Assistant Professor at TASCHA. "We were excited to find that this is not the case. Many users come from low- and middle-income backgrounds with varying levels of education and technology skills."

Lower education levels, higher certification rates

In fact, less than half of the MOOC users surveyed had completed college, compared to the 71% found in a [2015 study of edX users](#) that had nearly a third of respondents based in the U.S. In the developing world study, a quarter of MOOC users reported high school as their highest level of education finished.

When it comes to completion and certification, users in the developing world seem far ahead of their developed world peers: 49% of MOOC users surveyed had received certification for at least one course. The rate was even higher — 70% — when limited to employed respondents.



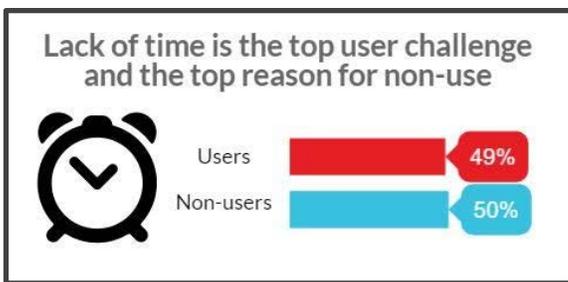
Nearly 80% of all MOOC users said they had completed at least one course. While the rate of students in the U.S. and Europe completing at least one MOOC is not known, individual course completion rates in those regions hover between just 5% and 10%.

The high completion and certification rates found may be tied to the fact that users in the three countries take MOOCs primarily to advance their education or career, rather than for enjoyment. The top three motivations users cited were: gaining skills to perform better in their job (61%), preparing for additional education (39%), and obtaining professional certification (37%). Users in more economically-advanced countries have tended to report higher levels of learning for personal fulfillment, such as in a [study of Coursera users](#) with two-thirds of subjects living in developed countries; that study found more students enrolled “just for fun” than for any other reason.

“At CourseTalk, we were heartened to learn that MOOCs are successfully reaching less educated students in developing countries — and with remarkably high certification rates,” said CourseTalk CEO Don Loonam. “This brings us one step closer to fulfilling the original promise of MOOCs: expanding access to affordable, quality education to anyone around the world.”

Despite expanding access, hurdles remain

The research also identified barriers inhibiting MOOC use in Colombia, the Philippines, and South Africa. The most significant barrier is awareness — 79% of non-users surveyed had never heard of a MOOC. Interestingly, researchers did not discover any demographic differences between that group and non-users who were familiar with MOOCs.



Among those non-users who were familiar, by far the most common reason for not enrolling was lack of time. Half of respondents in this group cited time constraints as a reason for not taking MOOCs, making it the number one answer in all three countries. This upends a widely-held assumption that technology is the main hurdle facing MOOC adoption in developing countries. In actuality, technical reasons for non-use were rarely cited. Factors such as high internet cost (6%), low computer skills (2%), and lack of computer access (4%) were some of the least-frequently mentioned.

“In each of the countries studied, awareness was the determining factor in whether people enrolled in MOOCs,” said Scott Andersen, director of the [Advancing MOOCs for Development Initiative](#) at IREX. “Governments and businesses can capitalize on this new form of educational outreach by encouraging lifelong learning, supporting the development of contemporary skills, and recognizing certification.”

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For more information on the Advancing MOOCs for Development Initiative, email melclark@uw.edu.