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MOOCS: A case study of ALISON platform

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Abstract

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is a recent trend in distance or e-learning, offering an opportunity to the unlimited number of students from diverse geographical areas, academic backgrounds, and professional pursuits to study high quality courses from prestigious institutions. MOOCs offer a large number of resources that have generated great results across the globe and attracted massive audience due to its free or low-cost innovative courses. It has entirely changed the way of distance-virtual learning. It offers new opportunities for imparting education over the internet and provides learning opportunities to those who aren't able to attend conventional classes. A large number of MOOCs platforms have been developed independently or in collaboration with various reputed institutions like SWAYAM, Udacity, Coursera, WizIQ, Edx etc. The present study will focus on Alison – Advanced Learning Interactive Systems Online, a major free MOOC platform. The study will explore Alison on parameters such as courses offered, subjects covered and publishers that Alison partners with to offer courses online.

Keywords: *Online courses, online educational platform, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Alison, Distance learning.*

1. Introduction

The term MOOC was coined to refer to a course developed by Stephen Downes and George Siemens entitled “Connectivism and Connectivity Knowledge” in 2008. Their aim was to create a wealthier learning environment for interactions between a wide variety of participants using online tools than traditional tools would allow. Twenty five students attended the course on the campus of the University of Manitoba while 2300 from around the world participated online (**McGill University, 2015**). The New York Times declared 2012 as “The Year of the MOOC” after a number of high profile professors from high profile universities launched various platforms to offer free university level courses online: the launch of Udacity by Stanford AI professor Sebastian Thrun, the launch of Coursera by Stanford AI professors Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng, and the launch of edX, a joint partnership (initially) between Harvard and MIT (**Watters, 2014**). The acronym “MOOC” has since then been applied to a variety of online and blended courses. MOOCs are one the most discussed trends in educational technology in recent years. MOOCs offer a large number of resources that have generated great results across the globe and attracted massive audience due to its free or low-cost innovative courses. It has entirely changed the way of distance-virtual learning. MOOCs have been hailed as the educational revolution that can transcend frontiers, race, gender, class and income (**Emanuel, 2013**). The recent emergence of MOOCs providing new scalable models that can provide an ‘education for everyone’ has generated a new and broad interest in rethinking learning and education (**Bruner, 1996**). MOOCs present new possibilities for the delivery of education over the internet and offer learning opportunity to those who aren't able to attend traditional classes. Learners can enrol and attend virtual classrooms from the comfort of their homes or office, and earn course completion certificates from reputed institutions (**Pujar and Tadasad, 2016**). Over the years a large number of MOOCs platforms have been developed independently or in collaboration with reputed institutions like SWAYAM, Udacity, Coursera, WizIQ, Edx etc. In this context, the present study is an attempt to assess Alison – Advanced Learning Interactive Systems Online, a major free MOOC platform with respect to courses offered, subjects covered and publishers that Alison partners with to offer courses online.

2. Literature Review

The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) is a new online medium for course delivery and learning. It enables thousands of learners to participate in the same course with high quality content and interactive tools for learning. **Ambadkar (2014)** states that Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) is a recent trend in education that is transforming traditional methods of teaching and learning. The ability of MOOCs to reach the masses is unquestionable. According to **Long (2013)**, MOOCs offer access to elite education in many corners of the world. They are reshaping the traditional methods of teaching and learning and are encouraging graduate students to reconsider the high price tag of campus-based learning. **Vishwanathan (2012)** reveals that MOOCs present learning opportunities to teachers across the globe. Teachers receive inputs on number of topics, participate in webinars, share opinions with other participants and above all, get motivated to play the role of online tutor. Moreover, the flexibility of these courses paves the way for collaborating with the online teaching community. **Gul (2018)** states that MOOCs offer open and free education to entire community where learners choose from a wide range of courses and get enrolled in the course of their choice very easily. Enrolled students get an opportunity to study and at the same time collaborate with their peers and experts across the globe. study independently. MOOCs has proven to be helpful to students who fail to pursue education through traditional methods due to certain issues such as financial constraints, lack of opportunities and geographical barriers. According to **Yuan and Powell (2013)**, MOOCs has attracted attention from mass media, entrepreneurial vendors, education professionals and tech literate individuals in the last few years. MOOCs actually came up with free access and offer courses that cut down the cost of higher education. From open access to open educational resources there is an increasing drive among higher education institutes to participate in this 'open movement'. As a result, elite universities have introduced web-based courses by setting up open learning platforms, such as edX. New commercial start-ups such as Coursera and Udacity have been started in collaboration with reputable universities that offer free or less charged online courses. **Bralic and Divjak (2018)** reveal that MOOCs support the experience of learning in virtual environments, providing a new experience to majority of the students, and make learning available to those who might not be able to follow conventional methods. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) have become a prominent feature of the higher education discourse in recent years. Yet, it has elevated various concerns and criticisms in educational platforms. **Margaryan, Bianco and Littlejohn (2015)** assessed the instructional design quality of 76 randomly selected MOOCs, the study concluded that majority of the MOOCs scored poorly on instructional design quality. However, most MOOCs scored highly on organization and presentation of course material. According to **Hew & Cheung (2014)**, MOOCs face difficulty in determining and evaluating students' performance, feeling of teaching in vacuum due to lack of feedback and response from learners and lack of student participation. The loose structure of MOOCs makes it difficult to assure its quality and even to measure obtainable goals. **Jordan (2015)** reveals that enrolment of students in MOOCs courses continues to grow but average completion rate as on 15th July, 2015 was only 15 percent. **Hew and Cheung (2014)** identify the reasons behind 90 percent dropout in MOOCs are lack of incentives, insufficient prior knowledge, failure to understand the content and lack of help when needed or many a times learners having other priorities or commitments to fulfil. **Liu, Liu, Lee and Magjuka (2010)** reveal that language barrier can hamper the learning process of learners and is one of the main dropout reasons in MOOCs. Therefore, learners need to have enough language learning aptitude to access MOOCs.

3. Objectives of the study

- 1.To explore the study areas of Alison.
- 2.To identify the courses offered by Alison

- 3.To identify the subject categories and courses offered under each category.
4. To identify the publishers associated with Alison and courses offered by them.

4. Methodology of the study

To accomplish the present study, the requisite data was collected from the official website of the Alison. The data was later tabulated, analysed and interpreted using the simple quantitative techniques to accomplish the objectives.

5. Data analysis and findings

The analysis presented below is based on the data collected from the official website of Alison. The data is presented in the form of figures and tables.

5.1 Study areas

Alison identifies three different areas of study which include Academic, personal development and workplace (Fig.1). Depending on learners’ personal goals and ambitions they may choose whatever area fits their learning needs. Learners can switch between areas of study, or study different courses from different study areas in parallel at any time. Once learners choose their area of study, they then have to choose a study sector which further divides learning choices. The Academic Study Sector will offer learners study options within primary, secondary or third level school or college. The personal development study sector is divided into personal improvement or activities and hobbies. The workplace study sector is further broken down into job role training or formal learning. After choosing the study area and study sector, learners can choose the level of difficulty that fits their personal knowledge and learning ambitions. Alison offers 3 tier difficulty rating 1,2 and 3, referred to as levels.

Fig. 1 Study areas



(Alison,2019)

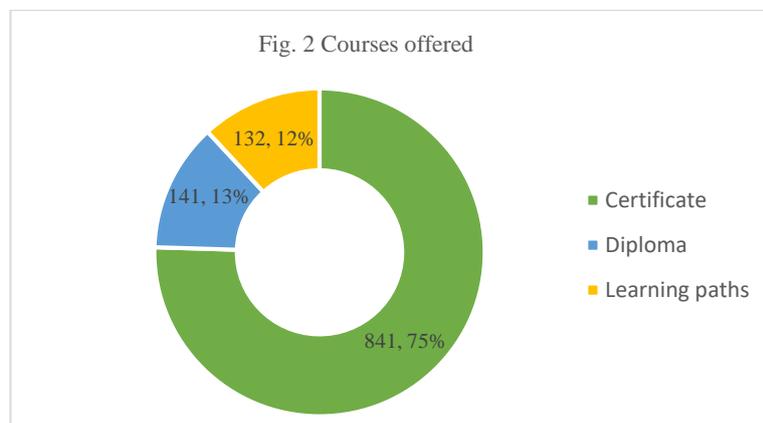
5.2 Courses offered

Alison offers over 1000 high quality courses available across 9 different categories, all absolutely free to complete. All courses are self-paced and have been designed by subject matter experts to give learners an interactive and enhanced learning experience. Depending on learners’ goals and interests, courses have been categorized into certificate courses, diploma courses and learning paths (Fig.2).

1. Certificate courses: As of March 1, 2019 Alison, offers 841 (75%) certificate courses with an average completion time of 2-3 hours. These courses provide learners with critical knowledge of individual concepts within a subject area, help them focus their learning on different topics, and provide learners with specific expertise in their field or industry. Alison offers certificate courses on variety of subjects, such as languages, media studies, journalism and public relations, health and fitness, business studies and so on.

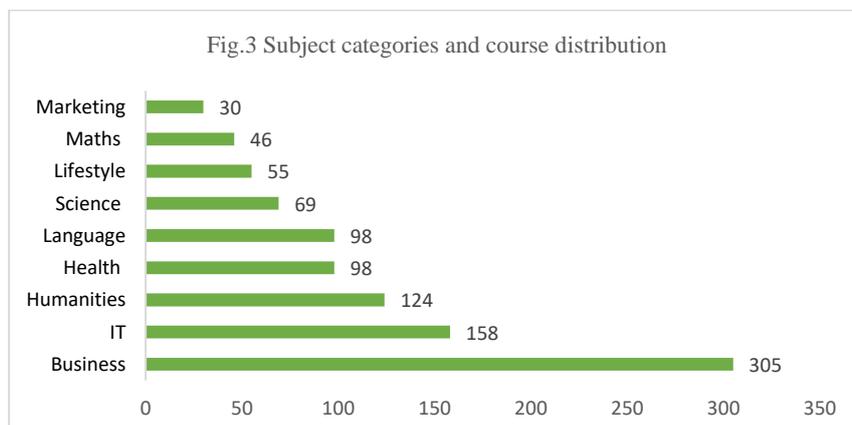
2. Diploma courses: Alison presently offers 141(13%) diploma courses with an average completion time of 8-10 hours. These courses help learners gain important skills and training on key topics. Their aim is to offer learners considerable understanding of a subject area, by helping them master multiple concepts within a subject. Courses offered under this category include workplace safety and health, business management and entrepreneurship, food safety, nursing and patient care and so on.

3. Learning paths: Alison presently offers 132(12%) courses under this category. Learning paths are a combination of niche courses that have been specially designed by experts, to help learners: Broaden their skillset; Progress their knowledge; or Master a subject. Examples include hospitality and food safety, Tourism with English language studies, google and business and so on.



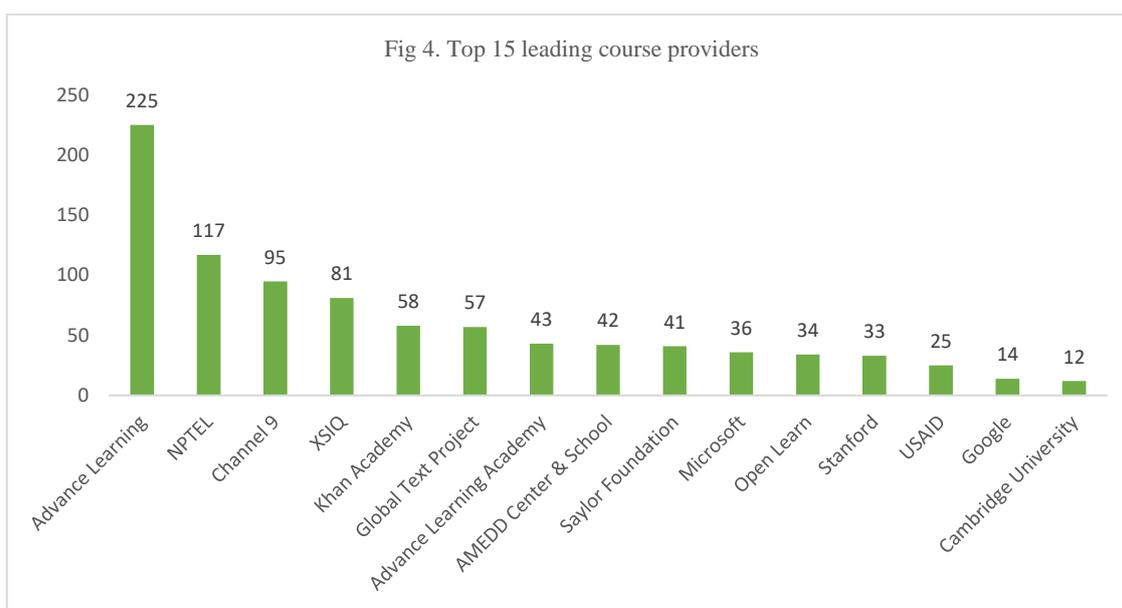
5.3 Subject categories and course distribution

Alison offers over 1000 high quality courses available across 9 distinct categories. Figure 3 shows that *Business* tops the list by providing 305 courses followed by *IT* with 158 courses. *Humanities* ranks third in the list by offering 124 courses followed by *Health* and *Language* offering 98 courses each. *Science*, *Lifestyle* and *Math* offer 69, 55 and 46 courses respectively while *Marketing* contributes to the least by offering only 30 courses.



5.4 Publishers and courses offered

As of March 01, 2019 Alison, partners with 69 publishers providing various online courses. Amongst the top 15 leading course providers on Alison, majority of the courses are provided by Advance Learning (225) followed by NPTEL, Channel 9 and XSIQ with 117, 85 and 81 courses respectively. As it is evident from Figure 4, least number of courses are offered by USAID, Google and Cambridge University.



5.41 Top 15 publishers and courses: Geographical distribution

As evident from Table 1, amongst the top 15 publishers on Alison, maximum number of publishers are from USA (8) followed by Ireland (3). Similarly, majority of the courses are offered by Ireland (38%) followed by USA (33.5%). Out of 15 publishers, 14 (93%) belong to high economic zone countries while only 1 (7%) belongs to lower middle economic zone (as per World Bank status). Thus, showing that High economic zone countries account for the maximum share.

Table 1-Top 15 publishers and courses: Geographical distribution

Country	No. of publishers N=15	No. of Courses N= 913	Economic level**
Ireland	3	349 (38) *	High
USA	8	306 (33.5)	High
India	1	117 (12.8)	Lower middle
Australia	1	95 (10.4)	High
UK	2	46 (5.03)	High

*figures in parenthesis indicate percentage

** as per World Bank statistics (<http://data.worldbank.org/>)

Conclusion

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are relatively a new concept that have spawned discussion in both professional and popular media. Alison is one of the MOOC providers that offers online courses across the world from various institutions with an aim to create collaborative programmes. It offers online education and skills training to learners in 195 countries irrespective of gender, geography, economic status or any other barriers that can so often stunt potential. Thus, making education a fundamental right of everyone. The present study reveals that out of the top 15 publishers, 14 belong to high economic zones or developed countries. Also, in terms of course distribution these 14 countries together account for 87% of the total course distribution. Even though there are a good number of institutions both from developing and other states but they still lag behind in terms of institutional participation and course distribution. State and institutional policy makers should be approached and made aware of the umpteen benefits of online learning environment. They should be encouraged to propagate and draft a national policy on online education (Shafiq, Wani, Mahajan & Qadri, 2017). Further, the study revealed that the least number of courses are offered in *Maths* and *Marketing*. Many people take great interest in these fields but due to lack of opportunities such people are discouraged to learn further. Therefore, MOOC platforms should revise their knowledge frameworks as well as scope of subject matter periodically in order to meet all the information needs of students keeping into consideration the current scenario of information overload and information explosion.

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