

Benefits and Costs of MOOC-Based Alternative Credentials

Key Takeaways from Baseline Survey of Participants in Open Online Courses which Culminate in a Non-Degree Credential

Research Question: *Will MOOC-based alternative credentials bring learners career, financial, educational, or other benefits that outweigh the direct costs and opportunity costs of participation?*

Data Sources: 3,086 survey responses were collected from learners in six Coursera Specializations and four edX MicroMasters offered by public and private universities in the United States between February 2017 and August 2018. The Specializations were in business and finance topics and the MicroMasters were in social science, computer science, business and management topics.

Participant Demographics

- Average age of the learners was 35
- 49% were female, 49% were male, and 1% identified as “other”
- 37% were White, 28% were Asian, 10% were Black or African American and 7% were multiracial
- 25% of the participants lived in the U.S., 12% in India, and 3% in each of Brazil, Canada, and Nigeria
- 55% were fluent in English and 41% had very good or intermediate English skills
- 79% had at least an undergraduate degree; 40% had a graduate degree
- 52% the learners worked full-time for someone else and 16% owned their own businesses
- Median annual income: \$46,000 for Specializations participants; \$23,000 for MicroMasters participants

Expected Benefits of Taking Courses in the Series

- 44% of participants were looking to improve their job performance
- 27% expected the courses to help them start their own businesses
- 26% were looking to learn something new
- Relatively few participants were expecting job promotions (11%) or pay raises (9%)
- 2% of participants were asked by their employers to take the courses

Plans for Earning the Alternative Credential and Further Education

- Overall, 35% of participants planned to earn the credential
- A quarter of participants planned to complete all the courses in the series, but not earn the credential
- 23% planned to earn the credential but not apply for a further degree program
- 9% of MicroMasters respondents planned to apply to the related Master’s program
- 5% of all respondents planned to apply to a different degree program at the same university offering the credential
- 5% planned to apply to a degree program at a different university from that offering the credential

Costs and Opportunity Costs

- Average cost of each of the 4 MicroMasters: \$980; average estimated cost of each of the 6 Specializations was \$360
- On average, learners expected to spend 6 ½ hours per week completing work for these courses
- MicroMasters programs averaged 34 weeks in length and the Specializations programs averaged 21 weeks
- 2% of participants were being paid by their employers for the time spent working on the courses
- 12% of participants were giving up paid time to work on the courses
- 6% were paying others for family care or to do the work for their paid job

Who Pays the Fees?

- 56% of the participants were paying the fees themselves
- 21% were auditing or taking the free version of the course
- Employers were paying the fees for 8% of Specializations learners and 2% of MicroMasters learners.