

To MOOC or not to MOOC? Exploring MOOC readiness of YNSPEED project participants

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Abstract: *Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have become one of the most prominent extensions to distance learning, especially during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic period. With the growth in the number of users of MOOCs (220 million users in 2021, excluding China) (Shah, 2021), educational opportunities within the field have been enhanced for both learners and course designers. The paper investigates the readiness of youth workers from 5 countries (Romania, Spain, Poland, Cyprus and Serbia) to engage in MOOCs either as learners or as instructors, after the training activities on MOOCs within the YNSPEED project have been completed. The data were collected using a questionnaire which was designed partially from the Driha et al. (2016) questionnaire and by a number of originally developed questions. Data were further analyzed using the SPSS software and descriptive statistic approach. The results suggest that although as many as 73.3% of the respondents have never completed a MOOC, MOOCs are perceived as an enhancement that might bring numerous benefits, but not offer the core value that traditional education brings. Apart from improving digital literacy skills, the results suggest, that MOOCs should provide a full course experience with high-quality content delivered by a renowned lecturer/university from abroad, at a lower cost, finalized by a certificate.*

Keywords: *MOOC; project; readiness; youth workers.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since their first launch in 2008 when they emerged as an alternative to traditional learning and the progression of distance learning, Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) have been perceived as either disruption or a threat to higher education [9]. It was mainly to their easy accessibility for all who were interested to sign up, that MOOCs supported the democratisation of the educational processes across the world, providing learners with a unique learner experience to enhance their skills and earn a certificate at the same time. However, it came as a surprise that in the decades prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the completion rate in various MOOCs was rather small (less than 10%) [11], and the number of MOOCs drop-outs was rather high. Some of the listed reasons for these unfavourable data were lack of time to complete the course or the inadequate level of instruction (too basic or too advanced).

The situation dramatically changed once the pandemic occurred, when offers to enrol on a MOOC erupted; one of the leaders in MOOC providing, Coursera, reported to have had as much as 607% increase in US enrollment only in March and April 2020, while, similarly, another MOOC provider, Udacity, had a 44% increase in weekly active users in a similar period. What is more, Udacity offered a special "quarantine special" to its learners by allowing free monthly access to a

number of MOOCs that would otherwise cost nearly 400 dollars [1]. In the post-pandemic uncertainties caused by disrupted economies in the societies which were dramatically shaken due to the outburst of the pandemic, securing steady employment became crucial. To be able to obtain additional certificates, acquire new skills and update their resumes, young people rely on MOOCs as an affordable and self-paced non-formal way of education. In that context, it is of great importance to investigate the readiness of non-formal educational structures to engage in either designing or promoting MOOCs, as an educational add-on that can significantly affect career paths and employment prospects.

1.1. Background of the study

The YNSPEED project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, was jointly carried out by five European institutions: IREA (Romania), EURECAT (Spain), BADEN (Serbia), Regionalne Centrum Wolontariatu (Poland) and Open University of Cyprus (Cyprus). The main goal of the project was to provide youth workers with the critical skills that are considered compulsory for active and responsible digital citizenship. The project aimed at addressing the hot topics of the nowadays digital era such as fake news, artificial intelligence, sustainable development and learning English with technology. In order to support open

and innovative practices for informal learning using digital platforms, tools and materials, the courses addressing these topics were implemented through a MOOC platform, which could be accessed by youth workers and youth aged 16-35, willing to develop and improve such skills, adjust to new social and economic context and thus, in a long term, improve their employability.

1.2. Review of literature on Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs)

MOOCs have become one of the most prominent extensions to distance learning, especially in the pandemic and the post-pandemic period. With the growth in the number of users of MOOCs (220 million users in 2021, excluding China) [2] educational opportunities within the field have been enhanced for both learners and course designers.

Interestingly, current research on MOOCs reported that a high percentage of students/young adults have never taken a MOOC before, although they express readiness to get involved. For example, those percentages range from 55% [3], to 69.5% [4], to over 91.3% [5] of young adults who have never enrolled on a MOOC.

Research showcases that the readiness to engage in MOOCs is a strong predictor of future dedication to engage in MOOCs as a learner. In 2017 Fook et al. [10] explored students' readiness and competence in using MOOCs. Their findings revealed that the respondents' readiness to engage in MOOCs was at a moderate level, but the study also confirmed that there was a positive relationship between students' readiness and competence in using MOOCs.

Subramaniam et al. [5], investigated the readiness levels of adult students studying in Malaysian higher education institutions. The researchers inferred that measuring MOOCs' readiness can be seen as one of the necessary prerequisites to the MOOC's enrolment. Their research study confirmed that the majority of respondents (70%) reported that they had not taken fully online courses before and an even higher percentage (91.3%) had not enrolled in any MOOC.

Similarly, in their study, Tahiru and Kamalludeen [4], researched the acceptance of MOOCs among postgraduate students in higher learning institutions in Malaysia, and their readiness to use them for learning. This study has found a low level of awareness and usage of MOOCs among postgraduate university students. The findings reveal that a majority of postgraduate students did not have knowledge of MOOCs, and very few had any actual usage of MOOCs. However, most demonstrated a positive attitude towards MOOCs and expressed an intention to use the platform for academic purposes. The authors conclude that each faculty should encourage lecturers to flip their classrooms with MOOC technologies and learning

materials for effective utilization of the system so students will really feel the need to utilize these services that come at less or no cost.

Comparably, Zulkifli et al. [7] investigated students' readiness in using MOOCs in their teaching and learning activities. The findings showed that the level of readiness for students to use MOOC is at the highest level with an overall mean of 4.02.

On the other hand, the main aim of Sezgin's study [6] was to identify the possible roles of MOOCs in the faculty-based teacher professional development. It was found that most of the preservice teachers and teacher trainers are uninformed or under-challenged about the MOOCs, but the vast majority of them reported that these open courses would be beneficial for teachers and preservice teachers. Some negative views of preservice teachers about the MOOCs are concerned with two specific views: language constraints and costs of certain courses.

In a Malaysian setting [4], recent research on students' readiness to use MOOCs for learning was conducted. The majority of the respondents had never heard of MOOCs prior to filling out the questionnaire (68.4%). In addition, a high percentage of the respondents never enrolled in any of the courses offered by MOOC providers (69.5%). The results of this research indicate that a majority of the respondents agreed that using MOOCs would help them get the latest updates in their areas of study and explore various educational topics within or out of their scope of the study.

Driha et al. [3] also recently reported on the BizMOOC project – Knowledge Alliance to enable a European-wide exploitation of the potential of MOOCs for the world of business" (hereinafter BizMOOC). It was launched with the support of the European Commission (EC) which aims to enable businesses, society (labour force) and universities to increase their activities and better exploit the potential of MOOCs. The research sample consisted of 1.193 respondents from all over the world. The research implies that although there is a general consensus that MOOCs provide a number of benefits, they have not yet become as accepted and valued as the more traditional teaching approach.

2. METHOD

An exploratory descriptive study has been utilized for this research, by deploying a questionnaire as a research instrument to collect data. As the sample of this research included only 30 youth workers who have completed training prior to the data gathering, the exploratory design as a procedure was chosen as an adequate approach since exploratory research findings are typically not generalizable to the population at large [8].

The treatment consisted of the training course designed for youth workers organized by IREA (Romanian Institute for Adult Education), one of the partners of the YNSPEED project, from 6th to 11th June 2022, in Timisoara, Romania. 30 youth workers from the 5 partner organizations participated in the course, whose main goal was to familiarize the participants with the MOOC courses on the topics of Artificial intelligence, Fake News, Sustainable development and Learning English with technology. The participants were intended to acquire the skills and attitudes regarding the usage of a MOOC course, so as to facilitate more flexible pathways of the non-formal education process. The course also provided guidelines on how to maintain young people's motivation in learning through informal practices and how to assist them in developing personal learning strategies, since the drop-out rates regarding MOOC courses are very high.

The main objective of this research was to assess to what extent the training course influenced the youth workers to express the readiness to engage in MOOCs either as learners or as instructors, after the training activities on MOOCs within the YNSPEED project have been completed.

2.1. Instrument and the Sample

The data were collected using the Driha et al. [3] questionnaire (2 questions) designed by the BizMOOC consortium, and a set of questions designed by the authors of this paper. The first part of the questionnaire is composed of 5 demography questions, while the second part of the questionnaire is related to Specific aspects related to online learning and MOOC readiness and consists of 9 questions. The questionnaire was typed in English and distributed to the project participants via the Google Forms tool. The data were further analyzed using the SPSS software and the descriptive statistic approach. The validity of the questionnaire was assured by Cronbach's alpha. The overall scale reliability value is 0.95 which is considered to refer to higher reliability.

The sample consisted of 30 youth workers who all completed the YNSPEED project training in May 2022. The first five questions of the questionnaire refer to demography data. The respondents come from five countries that partner in the YNSPEED project: 43% come from Serbia, 18% come from Romania, 10% from Spain, 10% from Cyprus, and 19% come from Poland. The majority of the respondents belong to the 20-25 age group, while 33.3% belong to the over 35 age group. Only 10% are between 26-35 years old. As for gender, 63.3% of the sample are female, and 36.7% are male.

The respondents' educational status was asked in question 4; 36.7% have a PhD degree or a pursuing one, 33.3% of them are currently in undergraduate studies, 16.7% have a Master's degree, and 13.3%

have a Bachelor's degree. Finally, although they are all engaged as youth workers (working in formal or non-formal educational sector teaching young people), the respondents' occupations differed; 33.3% are full-time students teaching from time to time or as a part-time activity, 30% are university lecturers, 16.7% are teachers/educators/practitioners, 10% are volunteers or NGO workers, and others chose not to reveal their occupation.

3. RESULTS

Section two of the scale was entitled 'Specific aspects related to online learning & MOOC'. The first two questions investigated whether the respondents have previously completed and/or designed a MOOC. As many as 73.3% of the respondents have never completed a MOOC, whereas 26.7% have completed a MOOC with/without a final certificate. 13.3% of the respondents have designed a MOOC before, and 86.7% have never designed a MOOC.

Question 3 (adapted from Driha et al.) was intended to explore the potential benefits of MOOCs for society in general (Table 1).

Table 1. Benefits of MOOCs for society

(3) Potential benefits of MOOCs for society. MOOCs will...	Std. Dev.	Mean
Benefit my personal development allowing me to better perform in my current job	1.06	4.10
Contribute to my personal improvement and leisure	1.09	4.10
Help me to develop skills for a new job	1.13	4.03
Benefit my future career	1.08	4.00
Facilitate new connections/networks	1.13	3.60
Not give any tangible benefit	1.01	4.26

The results imply that the respondents feel that MOOCs are not beneficial to society at large (M=4.26), but they believe MOOCs will influence the enhancement of both professional and personal skills and growth that will lead to a person's more meaningful career and a satisfying private life. These results are compliant with the results of [3], and are partly compliant with [4] who found that the respondents wish to explore various learning topics in and outside their programs of study (71.6), but also to fulfil their curiosity about learning (71.1%).

Question 4 was also borrowed from the Driha et al. BizMOOC questionnaire and is related to MOOCs expectations the participants would have if they enrolled on one. The results showcase (Table 2) that the participants expect to improve their digital skills, creativity and flexibility the most (M=4.3), then to 'Get low-cost or free opportunities for learning' (M=4.26), 'Encourage flexible thinking through innovative ways of learning', and finally to

‘Obtain knowledge from a well-known institution from abroad for free’ (M=4.20) respectively.

Table 2. *Expectations from MOOCs*

(4) MOOC expectations: To what extent do you have the following expectations towards a potential MOOC you would enrol? I expect it to allow me to...	Std. dev.	Mean
Get low-cost or free opportunities for learning	1.11	4.26
Have the most up-to-date information on a subject	0.99	4.10
Better understand a detailed aspect related to the subject	1.11	4.06
Obtain knowledge from a well-known institution from abroad for free	1.10	4.20
Provide a comprehensive overview of a specific subject from both academics and practitioners	1.01	3.86
Encourage flexible thinking through innovative ways of learning	1.03	4.20
Improve digital skills, creativity and flexibility	0.95	4.30

When compared to the responses given in the Driha et al. [3] research, the results are very similar. In the [3] sample, the answer with the highest score was ‘Obtain knowledge from a well-known institution from abroad for free’ (66.9%), followed by ‘Have the most up-to-date information on a subject’ (59.1%), and ‘Better understand a detailed aspect related to the subject’ (58.9%). Our findings are also in line with Tahiru [4] who found that 75.3% of the respondents said they would use MOOCs to broaden their understanding of their area of study. These imply that MOOCs are perceived as opportunities to improve skills or acquire knowledge from lecturers or universities which would otherwise be inaccessible and/or expensive. However, dissimilar to our finding that the most important expectation from a MOOC is enhancing digital skills and creativity, BIZ MOOC respondents scored the lowest for the statement ‘Improve digital skills, creativity and flexibility’ (41.3%). This might suggest that the discrepancy in the answer comes from the fact that the group of YNSPEED participants completed the training on MOOCs which might have influenced their responses here, in a way that they believe MOOCs significantly affect our soft skills. Another reason might be the size of the sample, and the context, so we must take into account that, unlike BizMOOC sample who belongs to a general population, our sample comprises formally educated youth workers who are engaged in education and training themselves. Another remark has to be made here, and that is that similarly to [3], [4] found that about 76.3% of the respondents said they would explore the courses available in MOOCs that are related to their study after creating an account with a selected provider.

The fifth question was designed to explore which elements of the MOOCs the participants perceive as relevant to their personal development (Table 3).

Table 3. *MOOCs for personal development*

(5) MOOC's elements most relevant for personal development are:	Std. Dev.	Mean
Gratis/for free	1.08	3.73
Complete online provision	1.05	3.73
Open licence to re-use parts of the course	1.13	4.03
A full/complete course experience	0.95	4.16
Certificate of competences	0.97	4.23
Assessed by anyone	1.14	3.73
Exchange in/improve foreign language skills	1.12	3.90
No entry qualifications needed	1.30	3.80
Intercultural exchange	1.17	3.80
Large numbers of participants	1.24	3.33

The response with the highest score was ‘Certificates of competences’ (M=4.23), while important aspects of MOOCs were also ‘A full/complete course experience’ (M=4.16) and ‘Open licence to re-use parts of the course’ (M=4.03). The ‘Large numbers of participants’ aspect was assessed as irrelevant and scored the lowest (M=3.33). Similarly to this, [4] also found that 71.1% of the respondents in their research wished to obtain more MOOC certificates.

Question 6 was composed to explore what are the important MOOCs aspects that make participants want to sign up for one as learners. The results (Table 4) reveal that the respondents feel that skills improvement (M=4.33) and knowledge of a particular topic (M=4.20) are the most vital aspects, whereas the least important motives to enrol on a MOOC are entertainment (M=3.33) and curiosity (M=3.76). Obtaining a certificate has a score of M=3.90 which is also of high (but not the highest) importance.

Table 4. *MOOCs' aspects useful for learners*

(6) How important are the following aspects when/if you decide to enrol on a MOOC/as a learner?	Std. dev.	Mean
Enhancing knowledge on particular topics	1.06	4.20
Skills improvement	1.03	4.33
Curiosity	1.10	3.76
Entertainment	1.24	3.33
Certificates	1.30	3.90
Hearing experts on the topic of my interest	1.10	4.23

Question 7 aimed at investigating a field preference if a potential MOOC was designed. As illustrated in Figure 1, 26.7% of the respondents would like to design a MOOC that would thematically deal with Professional skills development, and 23.3% believe that they would opt for an IT-related MOOC. Career development as a field of interest was selected by 20% of respondents, Language learning by 13.3%, and Hobbies and entertainment by 10%. Finally, Life hacks or self-help was chosen by only 6.7% of respondents. These results imply that almost 50% of the respondents place professional skills and career development above other fields, which they recognize as potentially attractive for students and/or they feel competent enough to design a MOOC that enhances those skills.

7. If you decide to design a MOOC in the near future, it will be within the following fields:
30 responses

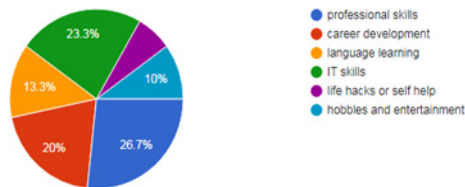


Figure 1. Thematic area of the potential MOOCs to be designed

Question 8 was related to the project participants as potential MOOC creators (Table 5). To the question ‘If you decide to design a MOOC, how important are these for you to include’, the respondents reported that, out of 4 options, implementing high-quality content is crucial (M=4.60), whereas earning money from a MOOC scored the lowest (M=3.16).

Table 5. MOOC’s aspects useful for designers

(8) If you decide to design a MOOC, how important are these for you to include:	Std. dev.	Mean
To implement high-quality content	0.93	4.60
To make it massive/easily accessed	1.05	4.07
To promote your skills and expertise	1.36	3.87
To earn money	1.23	3.16

Finally, question 9 (Table 6) was designed to explore what prevents the respondents from designing a MOOC. The ‘No time’ response scored the highest (M=3.76), whereas ‘No target group’ scored the lowest (M= 2.33).

Table 6. Reasons for not deciding to design a MOOC

(9) To what extent do the following aspects prevent you from designing a MOOC?	Std. dev.	Mean
No IT knowledge	1.62	2.73
No knowledge of pedagogy/teacher education	1.57	2.40
No time	1.04	3.76
No target group	0.92	2.33
No idea what to do	1.17	2.43

4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

With the growth in the number of users of MOOCs (220 million users in 2021, excluding China) [2], educational opportunities within the field have been enhanced for both learners and course designers.

In this study, we investigated the readiness of youth workers from 5 countries to engage in MOOCs as learners or designers after they have completed a training program on MOOCs within the YNSPEED project. Interestingly, as many as 73.3% of the respondents have never completed a MOOC, and. After the MOOCs have been around for more than a decade now, it comes as a surprise that youth workers who are employed in the educational sector and are well-educated themselves, have not completed any of the MOOCs available on the market. One of the reasons might lie in the education pathway they undertook – as the majority of them have been university educated, it is likely that they still do not recognize the value of MOOCs, as compared to the more traditional educational instruction. That the assumption we argue here might be correct, there is evidence in their attitude that MOOCs cannot benefit society at large, but can rather enhance personal skills development and help build a career path regardless of the formal education a learner has previously acquired. In other words, MOOCs are perceived as an add-on to a completed formal education, as an enhancement that might bring additional benefits, but not the core value a traditional education brings to students.

Apart from improving digital literacy skills, youth workers feel that MOOCs should offer learners a full course experience with high-quality content from a renowned university from abroad, presumably at a lower cost, followed by a certificate. If they were to be engaged as MOOCs designers, these youth workers would create a MOOC that would be related to professional skills development or language learning. However, lack of time prevents them from engaging in MOOC design, and they also report that earning from a MOOC is not a necessity. The next stage of the research would be to investigate whether the participants of the project have

designed a MOOC or at least completed one, and to explore to what extent their attitudes towards MOOCs have changed.

The practical implications of this study suggest that MOOCs should remain in the realm of the non-formal, deliberately chosen educational practice, and especially implemented in programs or training that aim at developing professional and/or soft skills. Having in mind that MOOCs are regarded as useful only as long as they provide certificates and quality content that could be re-used by the students (and for free), we come to what MOOCs basically are: chunks of online instruction offered to the "masses", usually of inadequate level to suit the needs of learners. Although there is the overall tendency that MOOCs are perceived as beneficial, in order to increase the number of enrolled students, in the years that come MOOCs will have to offer much more than what they offer today. Maybe some of the youth workers involved in the YNSPEED project will change the market for MOOCs, by implementing new perspectives and fresh approaches to the field.

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