Abstract Submitted: *Large Scale Online Skilling Programme: Trends and Tales*

Proposed Title:

Large Scale Online Skilling Programme: Lessons Learnt

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Abstract

Commonwealth of Learning supported a large-scale online skilling programme to enable continuing education to counter the disruption caused by COVID-19 for three years between 2020-23. Based on an online survey of those who participated in the programme, this paper aims at analysing the patterns pertaining to participation in such skilling programmes with respect to region, age, educational level, occupational status, gender, institutional support and access to resources. Some significant pointers emerge from these trends regarding how access to information, resources and support systems play a role in attaining success even in those programmes that are 'freely' available. The tale that emerges here is that though such programmes play an important role, existing inequalities continue to play a role in determining success even in 'free' programmes, and institutional support plays a major role for those who are otherwise not well-resourced in terms of access to various forms of resources. Resources and capability are used here in a wider sense referring to individual, social and community level capabilities.

Key words

Online learning, Lifelong learning, Digital Skills, Capability, Resilience

Introduction

The Skills for Work Certificate Scholarship programme, initiated by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and commonly referred to as the Skills Online programme, engaged a total of 94,804 learners from at least 25 Commonwealth countries over three years. These learners registered in 483,818 courses (136,127 course completions) through Grow with Google (GwG), Udemy and Coursera, paid for by COL. The initiative was designed in response to challenges that arose from the Covid-19 pandemic and appears to have achieved its post-pandemic recovery objectives in a broad sense. The initiative ended in 2024, as scheduled. We subsequently conducted an online survey to understand the profiles and experiences of the people who registered and received support from COL in the form of free access to courses.[1] Most learners reported that they benefited from the scholarships, but the evidence indicates inadequate participation rates among women, girls and those with limited access to information and technology. This paper presents this evidence and

[1] The survey was administered during June – July 2024, and a total of 7,482 responses were received and analysed. All ethical guidelines were followed, and the responses were fully anonymised before the analysis stage. A report has been published by the Commonwealth of Leartning and the paper and the report has overlaps, as they were prepared by the same authors using the same data.

argues that any such large-scale technology-based intervention tends to gravitate towards those who are relatively advantaged and unless mediated specifically, excludes the most marginalised.

The three platforms provided 17,300 licences per year, for a total of 51,900 licences over the three-year period. COL awarded scholarships twice a year, which provided access to learning for 103,800 potential learners over the three-year period. A total of 94,804 learners from at least 25 Commonwealth countries registered in 483,818 courses and completed 136,127 (28%). The survey was administered to all registered learners, 7,482 of whom submitted completed responses, signifying a response rate of 7.9%, which is considered good for this type of online survey.

COL adopted two routes to identify potential learners. One, it engaged country-based co-ordinators from partner agencies who nominated as well as advertised for applications. Two, individual learners could apply directly for a scholarship through a website created for this purpose. Each national partner established an email-based help desk, and in some cases also provided dedicated telephone lines. The help desk co-ordinators received queries through calls and emails, and tried to help individuals find solutions to their problems. If necessary, the co-ordinators escalated queries to the technical team at Coursera and Udemy or the core team at COL.

Although especially targeted towards youth, women, people with disabilities and public sector employees, there was no built-in mechanism to understand the profile of learners who registered to these three platforms[2] and therefore the survey becomes important in understanding who benefited from the scholarships. Learners could register for courses on more than one platform. Therefore, in the sample, there are 10,210 registrations for the 7,482 respondents across the three platforms. The learner-wise analysis uses the total sample of 7,482 and its distribution across four regions: Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, while registration-wise analysis uses a sample of 10,210 and its distribution across three platforms.

Each platform offered multiple courses, and learners could enrol in more than one course at a time. We use enrolment, completion and certification numbers for the courses, and so those numbers are much higher than the number of registrations or learners. The courses varied in terms of their duration (number of hours required to complete the course), difficulty level, and expectations of prior knowledge. Those factors are beyond the scope of this paper and the current analysis. It seems that a larger proportion of those who completed their courses chose to respond to the survey compared to those who did not complete any course. This difference becomes obvious in the analysis of the enrolment and completion, as completion rates are much higher for the sample than the completion rate that we have for all who enrolled, the universe. This has created a bias that

[2] The Grow with Google (GwG) programme provides training in job-ready skills in nine specialisations: IT automation with Python, UX design, data analytics, IT support, project management, digital marketing and e-commerce, business intelligence, advanced data analytics and cybersecurity. The Udemy skills certification programme offers learners access to over 10,000 courses on the Udemy for Business platform in a variety of areas, including, for example, business, entrepreneurship, IT project management, personal development, digital marketing and communications. The Coursera skills certification programme offers learners access to over 10,000 high-quality e-learning courses developed by the world's top universities and companies. Coursera managed the administration of the GwG scholarships in addition to its own.

we have taken into account while interpreting the findings. Please note that all references to percentages and distribution relates to the sample, without mentioning that every single time.

Key characteristics of the learners and distribution across regions and platforms

The highest number of learners in the sample came from Africa (45%) and Asia (34%), followed by the Caribbean (19%) and the Pacific (2%). Overall, 60.5% of learners identified themselves as male and nearly 38.5% as female; 1% preferred not to say or described themselves as "others." A small percentage of respondents (2.6%) identified themselves as PWD. The male–female ratio skews male in Africa and Asia, and female in the Caribbean and the Pacific, especially the Caribbean.

Almost 60% of the respondents reported that they registered in one platform, 30% in two platforms and the remainder in three platforms. Coursera accounted for 59% of all registrations, followed by Udemy (24%) and GwG (17%). This pattern was consistent across all four regions. Overall, male registrations outnumbered female registrations for all platforms. The share of female registrations was slightly lower than the share of female learners, which indicates that female learners were less likely than male learners to register on two or more platforms. The gender-wise distribution of registrations in the four regions reflects the same pattern seen in the distribution of learners: Men outnumbered women for all three platforms in Africa and Asia, while the opposite was true for the Caribbean and the Pacific. While Coursera courses had the highest enrolment, the relative share of GwG increased for both male and female learners with bachelor's and master's degrees or higher.

On the whole, learners in the ≥ 30 age group constituted almost half (47%) of the total number of learners, with the next highest proportion of learners being in the 25–29 age group. The < 20 age group accounted for the smallest proportion of all learners in every region. This was expected, as the programme was primarily targeted at the post-secondary learners. Women's representation was lower than that of men for all age groups, and for all platforms. In Africa and Asia, the highest proportion of learners comprised those with bachelor's degrees but in the Caribbean and the Pacific, persons with post-secondary certificates and diplomas outnumbered all others, including those with bachelor's degrees. In Africa and Asia, persons with a master's degree or higher outnumbered those with post-secondary certificates and diplomas. Men outnumbered women in all categories in Africa and Asia, and the reverse was largely true in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

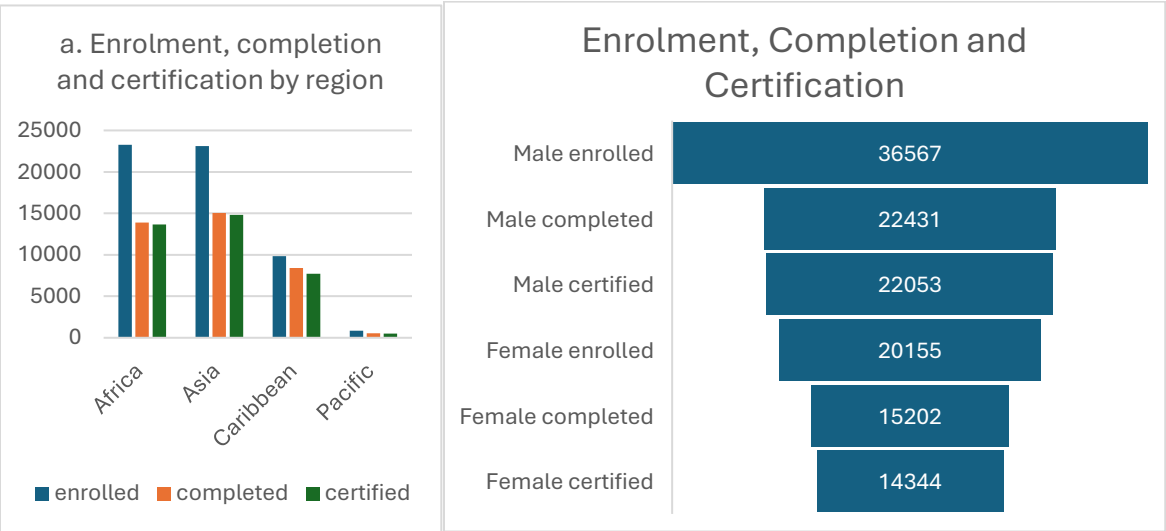
An interesting fact that emerged was that 60% of learners were employed. Only 19% reported being unemployed, and nearly 13% were students preparing for employment. The share of employed learners was highest in Africa. Gender differences were not high: 60% of male and 59% of female learners were employed, and 7% of female and 9% of male learners were self-employed. This was probably a result of the two features of the implementation model: one, targeting the employees of the COL's partner institutions such as government and universities, and two, the use of open invitation for potential learners to apply. The second channel was probably used by those who were informed and could access both information and technology relatively easily. This seems to have led to a high level of use by those employed in the private sector. The highest proportion of learners

who were employed when they participated in the courses worked in the private sector, followed by the government/ civil service, NGOs and academic institutions. The pattern was largely the same across all regions.

Enrolment, completion and certification rates

As mentioned earlier, the sample reported a higher completion rate than what COL had documented for the entire enrolment. In the sample, 66.4% of those who enrolled completed one or more courses, and 97% of those who completed a course opted to download their certificate. Female participants reported a higher completion rate (75.4%) than male participants (61.3%). However, 98% of courses completed by male learners resulted in certification, compared to 94% of courses completed by female learners. Certification refers to the number of those who downloaded the certificates. The Caribbean region reported the highest completion rate (85.5%), followed by Asia (65.1%), the Pacific (63.4%) and Africa (59.7%). All regions reported a higher completion rate among female participants. The gender difference was greatest in the Caribbean (M: 76.5%, F: 88.35%), followed by Africa (M: 57%, F: 68.6%), Asia (M: 64.1%, F: 67.3%) and the Pacific (M: 62.2%, F: 64.7%).

Figure 1. Enrolment, completion and certification for the sample by (a.) region and (b.) gender (number of courses)



It is interesting to note that GwG had the lowest enrolment but the highest completion rate (69%). Coursera had the highest enrolment and the lowest completion rate (44%), and Udemy reported a 56% completion rate. Female participants reported a higher completion rate across all three platforms.

How these courses helped

An overwhelming majority of the participants reported that they benefited from the course or courses they enrolled in. They either found it/them "very useful," or said it/them helped them learn new skills or improve their existing knowledge. This was true for both female and male participants. About 3% reported that they used the courses to gain credits for a diploma or degree they were pursuing, and a little more than 6% reported that their course helped them get a job. This distribution also reflects the fact that the vast majority of the participants were already employed and were therefore seeking to upgrade their skills or knowledge rather than looking for new employment.

Table 1. Perceived benefits of the courses (%)

	Learned new skills	Improved existing knowledge	It was very useful	Helped in getting a job	Credit for the course	Did not help in getting a job	It was not useful	Did not learn anything new
Female	39.0	24.96	25.36	5.55	3.09	1.57	0.32	0.44
Male	38.9	26.81	23.38	6.47	2.78	1.11	0.24	0.15
Total	38.8	26.12	24.14	6.12	2.89	1.27	0.27	0.31

Table.2: Five most appreciated features of the courses

	Ease of learning through videos and modules on mobile devices	Relevance and high quality of course content	Easy navigation within the course modules	Could easily place it in my routine	Guidance received from the help desk
Female	2,495	1,842	1,723	1,142	807
Male	3,946	3,334	2,665	1,470	1,541
Others	54	39	27	28	18
Total	**6,495**	**5,215**	**4,424**	**2,640**	**2,366**

All learners greatly appreciated the content, ease of navigation and the compatibility with mobile devices. The flexibility associated with being able to choose when to learn ("Could easily place it in my routine") was also identified as important. The proportion of female learners who mentioned this factor was comparatively higher than the proportion of male learners who singled it out. Learners also expressed particular appreciation for guidance from the help desk. Fewer respondents identified challenges compared to those who identified positive features. The top three challenges identified by learners related to weak Internet connections, high Internet charges

and lack of time. However, it is important to note that these all relate to personal and locational circumstances and not to the content or design of the courses. Guidance from the help desk and navigation within the course modules were also identified as challenges. Given the appreciation expressed for these two factors, it appears that learner experiences with them varied.

Table 3. Five greatest challenges faced

	Navigation challenges within the course modules	Insufficient support or guidance from the help desk	Time required	High Internet charges	Weak Internet connection
Female	383	482	764	603	997
Male	502	855	1,318	1,521	1,724
Others	12	11	29	15	25
Total	**897**	**1,348**	**2,111**	**2,139**	**2,746**

Conclusions

In terms of regional representation, the highest number of learners came from Africa and Asia, followed by the Caribbean and the Pacific. This was to some extent expected, given the varying population sizes of Commonwealth countries in these regions. What is interesting, though, is that the distribution of learners across the three platforms was similar in all regions: Coursera platform accounted for more than half of total enrolments, and GwG accounted for less than 20% of total enrolments in all four regions. The gender disparities in favour of men were more pronounced in Africa and Asia, and reversed in the Caribbean and the Pacific, especially in the Caribbean. This reflects prevalent trends and patterns of girls and women facing inequality in education in Africa and Asia, and men and male youth disengaging from education in parts of the Pacific and the Caribbean.[3] These patterns make it clear that enrolments in these courses reflected the existing patterns without any sign of influencing those norms.

A clear tilt towards higher age groups was observed. More than 75% of enrolments were among the ≥ 25 age group, and almost half were among the ≥ 30 age group. The ≥ 30 age group, especially the male contingent, seem to have accessed the courses much more than any other group, especially in Africa. The majority of those who accessed the courses were already employed, and their predominance could be a result of deliberate targeting of government and university employees or greater access to information and technology. This indicates that the courses were used mainly as opportunities for reskilling and upskilling for lifelong learning.

Registration in the courses was also skewed towards those who had already accessed higher education. Overall, persons with bachelor's and master's (or higher) degrees far outnumbered other participants, accounting for more than 62% of the total sample. This was true for both male

[3] World Education Statistics, 2024 - UNESCO Digital Library

and female participants. The distribution of enrolment across platforms remained largely similar for educational qualifications, although enrolment in GwG was higher for both male and female participants with bachelor's and master's degrees. This trend is perhaps reflective of two facts: Participants needed a decent level of technical capability to be able to navigate the courses, and those with higher education levels had greater access to the required information and technology.

An overwhelming majority of the participants reported that they benefited from the courses. While we are aware of the sample bias in favour of those who completed courses, these percentages tell us that even some of those who did not complete a course found it useful. Given that the majority of learners were already employed, learning new skills and improving existing knowledge both represent significant gains, especially in view of the need to strengthen digital skills in developing countries. Only a small percentage of participants said their course was not useful or did not help them get a job.

Learners identified the content, ease of navigation and compatibility with mobile devices as particularly attractive features of the courses. The top challenges identified by learners related to infrastructural and household/personal constraints — inadequate or unreliable Internet connection, high Internet charges and lack of time — rather than anything directly related to the content and design of the courses.

This study did not allow us to examine if participation in the courses contributed to a significant shift in terms of enhancing institutional resilience. There was very limited use of the courses to gain credit for diploma or degree programmes. The entire programme was designed to be used by individuals within and outside institutions, and only a large number of institution-specific enrolments would have created the critical mass needed for institutional change.

Overall, the programme seemed to help a large pool of people across all Commonwealth regions upgrade their digital skills and sharpen their capacity to learn new skills by using technology. As a response to the pandemic, and in the face of very limited resilience among a significant proportion of partner institutions, this intervention appears to have served its purpose. However, an intervention of this type may not be suited to accommodating wide-ranging and equitable access or institutional development in the post-pandemic period.