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EDUCATION

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LEARNING: WHAT YOU NEED VS WHAT IS NICE!

ALISON CEO & Founder, Mike Feerick answers a few on the benefits of MOOCs with a workplace focus

Galway, Ireland – and we are very internationally focused.

WHAT DO YOU REGARD AS ALISON'S USPS AND COULD YOU DESCRIBE THE THINGS THAT DISTINGUISH ALISON FROM OTHER MOOCs?

Entirely Free – everything that a learner “needs” to have on ALISON is free – including learning and certification – everything that is a “nice” to have (such as a physical parchment) is a paid service. It makes sure that anyone, regardless of income but has web access, can educate themselves for free.

We are a for-profit social enterprise. Our goal is to drive all costs of education to zero – including the costs of online learning, certification, learning management and publishing. We endeavor to drive all costs to zero but still make enough to be sustainable and scalable. If we were large company or Venture Capital controlled, and not led by a Social Entrepreneur, we could not do this. Because we are self-funding, it means we don't need to continue raise money from donors to expand our services.

We are very strong in developing countries – with over 1.5 million learners in Africa and 700,000 in the likes of India. The fact you can learn and be tested on anything you learn on ALISON anywhere you can access the web is a powerful validation of the quality of service we offer.

We focus on “bottom of the pyramid” – in that our audience are very much people in developing countries or marginalized in developed countries – yet – the quality of our content is very high and competes well with offerings in the most advanced online learning markets such as the USA and UK.

We have a very strong vision of what we want to do – and have a very committed, talented and international team driving our offering. We have over 15 nationalities at our HQ in

We have momentum! We signed up 300,000 new learners in Feb 2016 with next to no advertising. Our reputation is growing by word of mouth more than anything, not expensive TV Advertising and the like.

We focus on the workplace – whereas many of the other traditional MOOC type supplies have a third level focus. We are about empowering people to better their skills – enabling them to improve the economic circumstances for themselves, their families and communities.

We are workplace focused—so you'll find business, health and safety, language and personal development courses on ALISON—but also many courses on areas such as teaching training and a full high school curriculum—particularly relating to the likes of math and statistics, which are used more and more in the modern workplace.

WHOM DO YOU REGARD AS YOUR PRIMARY COMPETITORS?

We are not aware of any competitor with exactly the same business model, but in various ways competitors with part-similar offerings would be as follows:

Linda.com/Linkedin (Technical & IT Training)

UDEMY.com (Technical and General Knowledge)

EDX/Coursera/Udacity – Third Level Focus (We have lots of university level courses too though it's not our main focus.

You Tube (Probably the biggest learning platform in the world – but on it you can rarely tell the overall quality, level, duration, depth of the content or publisher – whereas on ALISON, such attributes are clearly stated.

Many providers who started free are edging away from that – however we are thriving with our free offering and it will always remain core to our mission and how we do business.

HOW DO YOU CONSISTENTLY ENSURE HIGH QUALITY IN THE CONTENT THAT YOU OFFER?

We have a growing team of specialists with traditional Masters Degrees in Pedagogy who review all courses and prospective courses for a high standard of structure. We are not subject-matter-experts on every subject, but as we have such a large platform, with millions of learners, we hear back in minutes if we have something wrong in one of our new courses!

ON WHAT BASIS DO YOU SELECT COURSES OR UNIVERSITIES TO WORK WITH?

We work with publishers with an undoubted reputation and subject-matter-expertise in each subject area. We carefully select the publishers we work with to ensure the courses meet the needs of our learners and are also constantly looking ahead to identify future skills gaps and focus on developing programmes to meet these gaps. For instance, we have developed a suite of up-to-date new HTML5, CSS3 and JavaScript courses.

HOW DO YOU ASCERTAIN THE AUTHENTICITY OF STUDENTS BEFORE PROVIDING CERTIFICATIONS?

How ALISON Certification works is that a learner must achieve an 80% pass rate to become an ALISON graduate. The tough part of being an ALISON graduate however is that you can be tested again on that course anytime, anywhere, once you can get access to the web. We are teaching basic workplace skills – not neuro-science. If someone says they can work with MS EXCEL to a certain level, or have a basic knowledge of carpentry, they can be given a quick 20 or 30 question test on the spot. This is possibly because of the ubiquity of the web!

WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR USER BASE AND ITS DIVERSITY? DOES THE DIVERSITY ADD TO THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION THAT USERS RECEIVE IN ANY WAY?

Our user base is certainly very diverse – but frankly, we don't allow them to interact very much to date. As an education site, we have been careful to make sure that the narrative on the website is education related and appropriate. We have grown a lot though – and are now in the position to allow learners to communicate and socialize more – and still have a strong degree of moderation present.

All learning on ALISON is Self-Paced. That means it is flexible in terms of when you study and how much you study at a time. This makes our learning solution very popular with women at home – either minding kids – working part-time – and perhaps at home because of cultural issues. We have a great many individual stories told in the community section of our website – you can read many inspiring stories there.

IS THERE ANYTHING THAT STANDS OUT ABOUT INDIAN USERS?

Yes. As opposed to other cultures, Indian people like to attain a Certificate for the purpose of attaining a job. In other countries, we remark

that learners are often more interested in more basic self-development. Also, ALISON has advertising as a revenue source—and the Indian population on the whole do not click adverts like other nations. It seems to be a cultural issue. Advertising income is important to us—but what is more important is that people are learning and improving their circumstances for themselves. There is a lot of interest in business courses in India—and lots of budding entrepreneurs preparing to start businesses—an encouraging sign! Finally, the numbers of learners we sign up in India always amazes us. Everyone who has never been to India knows that there are a great many people there—but when you see them study online, you see the reality of it. In India, we are very conscious that many people have no access to formal or informal learning of the type we provide—hence we are conscious of the responsibility we have of ever broadening the number of courses we have and the subjects we teach.

In a recent survey of our graduates 88% declared that learning online had improved their confidence and very importantly 90% said it encouraged them to learn further. While we have some school curriculum based courses the majority of our courses are aimed at helping our learners develop practical workplace skills. The kind of skills that will help land them a well-paid job or achieve a promotion. Courses in Coding, WebHYPERLINK “<https://alison.com/courses/web-page-design-using-html5-and-css3>” HYPERLINK “<https://alison.com/courses/web-page-design-using-html5-and-css3>” design, English language skills, Human Resources, Project Management, Hospitality Management, Customer Service and Business Management are in big demand among our Indian learners.

WHAT IS YOUR COURSE-COMPLETION PERCENTAGE? DOES THE PROVISION OF “FREE” CONTENT ALSO TRANSLATE TO A HIGH DROPOUT RATE OR COURSES THAT ARE BEGUN BUT NEVER COMPLETED? HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN USER INTEREST?

ALISON has a much higher completion rate than the 5% or so figure we see mentioned for American MOOCs. Firstly, our courses are shorter—which helps completion—and they are self-paced—so you study when you wish and for as short and as long a time as you wish. Our view is that a lot of traditional providers assault free learning as a defence of their own offering. The fact is that when learning is free, many people sign on – to have a look – as much as you might walk into a shop and look around to see what there is to buy. A shopper who looks around but does not buy is hardly a customer? At ALISON, we have an average completion rate in the high teens, however, if you take out those who study 10 minutes or less, you go to completion rates of 30 and 40% – and it's all free.

We are learning more and more about our learners and how to encourage them not only to complete—but to begin other courses. A simple fact is if a learner finishes one course, they are likely to start another. People like to learn—that's why learning should be free!

DO YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS ON WHAT POTENTIAL STUDENTS SHOULD LOOK OUT FOR BEFORE SIGNING UP FOR AN ONLINE COURSE WHETHER FREE OR PAID ON ANY ONLINE LEARN-

ING PLATFORM?

Students should definitely seek out free versions of courses before they pay for a course. New Courses are being published every day. Before you pay a deposit or fee, do a smaller shorter course on the subject for free to find out if the subject actually matches you preconceived notions. We often get this “testing” with highly popular courses on ALISON such as Diploma in Psychology and Diploma in Project Management. Rule is check it out for free first—and maybe free has all you want!

The size of the platform does matter. If you register and study with ALISON, you can print out your Learner Record—a print out of all the courses you have completed on one sheet. Hence, it’s useful to learn on a platform with a broad array of courses. You’ll also be more comfortable once you get used to the same trusted interface.

WHAT’S THE PRICE-SPECTRUM OF CERTIFICATIONS ON ALISON?

Firstly, buying a PDF or Diploma Parchment on ALISON is a choice. You don’t have to buy any PDF or Parchment to prove you have completed a course and graduated on ALISON—that is our social enterprise commitment. If you wish to purchase a PDF or Parchment, we are mindful of the countries—and the relevant development of same. For countries such as India and Pakistan, or PDF’s can cost as little as €4 each. A Diploma will be 50% of our global price which is on average about €60. Learners buy PDFs and Parchments not just to present to employers or hang on a wall, but 30% tell us they do so to support the ALISON free learning mission—something we greatly appreciate from our learners.

HOW MUCH VALUE DO ALISON CERTIFICATIONS HAVE IN THE REAL WORLD? CAN THEY HELP SECURE A JOB OR HELP CLIMB THE CORPORATE LADDER? WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING THROUGH ALISON?

By 2014, we had estimated through our own research that over 100,000 of our learners around the world got a job or got promoted by having completed an ALISON course.

Informal learning—and non-traditionally accredited learning which is what we are—is especially useful to show a prospective employer that a candidate or employee in line for a promotion is still learning—is keeping up-to-date and remains curious. Where competition is tight, being able to prove or show that you have completed independent learning is often the difference of getting that job or allowing someone else get it ahead of you. This is especially so for older workers. Increasingly employers are more concerned you have the necessary skills, not where you got those skills and how much you paid to acquire them. A recent Open University survey in the UK revealed that informal certification from free online courses was the third most important factor employers considered when recruiting new staff.

WHAT SORT OF COURSES CURRENTLY WITNESS-

ES THE GREATEST DEMAND? WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE STREAMS/ COURSES THAT WILL EXPERIENCE THE MOST DEMAND IN THE FUTURE AND WHY?

In India our most popular courses are English language related—particular spoken English. IT and business courses are also particularly popular.

FROM WHERE YOU’RE STANDING WHAT DOES THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION AND MOOCS LOOK LIKE?

We believe that online education will be largely free—with free learning and certification available on every subject, free learner management available to trainers and training organizations—and also free publishing. We are pioneering a world where everyone is a learner—but also everyone is a teacher.

ARE THERE TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES WAITING IN THE WINGS THAT ARE LIKELY TO TOTALLY REVOLUTIONIZE THE ONLINE/DISTANCE LEARNING LANDSCAPE?

Yes, keep an eye out for the release of our publishing platform this summer and the release of our upgrade free LMS. It will change the world as we know it.

PLEASE DO FEEL FREE TO ADD ANY OTHER CRUCIAL DETAILS THAT YOU FEEL WE MIGHT HAVE OVERLOOKED.

The American MOOCs get a lot of attention because they have raised a lot of money and have high profile backers, however, the numbers behind ALISON are equally impressive. We were the first MOOC in our view—founded in 2005, launched in 2007— have continually pioneered new ideas – and are achieving very substantial scale. More than anything, we have a clear vision of the future which will enable us to move from the 7 million people we have on-line now to 100 million and on to one billion in a relatively short time.

We are committed to India—and experiencing excellent growth there. It will shortly be our largest market worldwide—mainly because the bottom of the pyramid/workplace focused learning that we provide is most especially needed there.

Separately, we are opening an ALISON technical office in India—mainly to expand our currently Irish-based analytics team in the coming months—which will mean many trips to India in the coming years.