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FEERICK: At the grade school he attended in Ireland. "Knowledge and understanding," he says, "are being unleashed via the web like never before."

ISSUE FOCUS: EDUCATION INNOVATION

by Garry Emmons

From pushing the envelope to updating the tried and true, HBS alumni are influencing the way education does business

Training the Global Workforce, Gratis

Mike Feerick (MBA 1993)



Education is a human right. So says Article 26 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is a driving force behind the founding of ALISON.com, the online education company Mike Feerick launched in 2007. Based in Ireland, ALISON (Advance Learning Interactive Systems Online) is a for-profit social enterprise that offers some 500 free online courses in basic education and workplace skills—essentially a community college curriculum—that can lead to global training certificates and diplomas for its 2 million students around the world. (For example, ALISON offers certification at no charge for a competing course to the European Computer Driving License, a basic requirement for any IT job in Europe, which otherwise can cost as much as \$500 per course.) English language, computer skills, and business management curricula are especially popular. Explains Feerick, "For individuals, access to our courses is free. When an organization is involved, we charge. Advertising also brings in revenue."

ALISON enables potential employers to immediately test the skill of certificate-holding ALISON graduates through 20-question "flash tests" that assess their knowledge and expertise. "It's a tough standard," notes Feerick, "because unlike a Harvard degree, you must be open to being tested on something you profess to know at a moment's notice—long after you've graduated."

Feerick believes that facts are delivered most effectively online, but at some point in the process, human interaction (via Skype or more advanced technologies to come) is needed to develop that knowledge. "Education is a \$3 trillion industry globally, and no player in the world controls even 1 percent of it," he says. "I think there will be a Facebook or Google in learning. I'd like it to be us."