

UPTAKE ICT – MOOC ON DIGITAL EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract

"Uptake ICT2life-cycle: digital literacy and inclusion to learners with disadvantaged background" is an Erasmus+ project that aims at enhancing digital literacy among adults with disadvantaged backgrounds. One of the project's outputs is a MOOC on Digital Employability. This paper presents and reflects upon this product, analysing data collected from the students that followed the course as pilot-group. The experience has proved very positive since students recognized the technical quality of the MOOC, as well as the interest, relevance and utility of its contents. A bridge between academia and the work market was established and the students' awareness of several career opportunities was raised. These various aspects seem to recommend the replication of this MOOC as well as the making of similar ones.

The adopted methodology that the trainers involved in this action decided to use aimed at reaching two major target groups: higher education students and other participants that were enrolled in parallel training sessions. Trainees from the Higher School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Santarém had two sorts of profile, according to their study area, more specifically, communication and multimedia or plastic arts and multimedia. So, the idea underlying the chosen strategy was to diversify the target population of the MOOC, and to establish a bridge between participants who had more competencies in the field of ICTs (the multimedia class), and those who has lesser skills in this field (the art class). This diversity implied that the achieved results and metrics, both analytical data and statistic results concerning the used platform and the course's content, included answers given by students with different learning profiles. The MOOC focused on the importance of ICT for employability. It presented information and suggestions on three main areas, Employability, Freelancing and Entrepreneurship. Each module of the course had several lessons since the educational contents were structured into specific sections, each one addressing a key subject and providing sets of examples that helped students to better understand the focused issues.

The MOOC also includes video presentations with real life examples of successful entrepreneurs and freelancers, telling about their experiences and giving advice on how to thrive in the current job market. This is an innovative aspect that means both an approach between business and education, as well as to bring students closer to the objective requirements of working life outside schools.

Keywords: Innovation, technology, research projects, etc.

1 THE MOOC IN DIGITAL EMPLOYABILITY: AN OVERVIEW

The Massive Online Open Course on Digital Employability was one of the activities developed in the frame of the European Project #Uptake ICT2life-cycle: digital literacy and inclusion to learners with disadvantaged background#, a project subsidized by the financial program Erasmus + (Key Action 2: Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices - Project number 2014-I-PTI-KA200-001084).

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The employability section, addresses four major areas of interest:

- Online Job Searching: aiming at helping students and other participants in their initial contact with the job market, for example, how to find the best job offers, and where to search online for job opportunities;
- CV creation: this module leads the participants to learn how to create a well-structured, appealing and innovative curriculum that corresponds to the job market needs;
- Cover letter: this is one of the most important contents that the participants need to learn about in order to present themselves to a future employer or company that they are interested in;
- The job interview: which is often fundamental for getting a job, and implies not only objective knowledge in the work area, but also a set of soft skills that the candidate must master.

The Freelancing section consists in an e-module on “how to search for freelancing proposals”. At this stage, the involved student is expected to gather a set of skills and know-how that enables him/her to become a freelancer. The participants’ attention is also drawn to the challenges that working by themselves imply, as well as to the importance of managing their own responsibilities as freelance workers.

Lastly, the Entrepreneurship section of the MOOC includes the following stages:

- Ideas: creation and development, where the processes and the several steps that a person must take in order to create, implement and manage a service or company are explained;
- The business plan, which is the strategic and fundamental planning phase that bases and boosts any entrepreneurial initiative.

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2 RESULTS

After attending the MOOC course on Digital Employability, including all the three main areas described above, the trainees were asked to answer a questionnaire aiming at estimating the validity and adequacy of the course, both regarding its technical operability, and the pertinence of its contents. The team gathered 23 inquiries, and subsequently analysed the information provided, as shown below.

The first question of the survey was “How do you rate the quality of the MOOC in terms of its technical operation?”. The majority of the participants had a very positive opinion, saying that the technical components of the platform, such as operability, interface and other aspects, were “Good” (18 answers). As for the remaining, only 3 of the participants chose “Average” and the other 2 said that the quality of the technical aspects was “Very good”. Nobody chose the options “Poor” or “Very poor”. Nevertheless, these results imply that there is still some room for possible improvements of the platform.

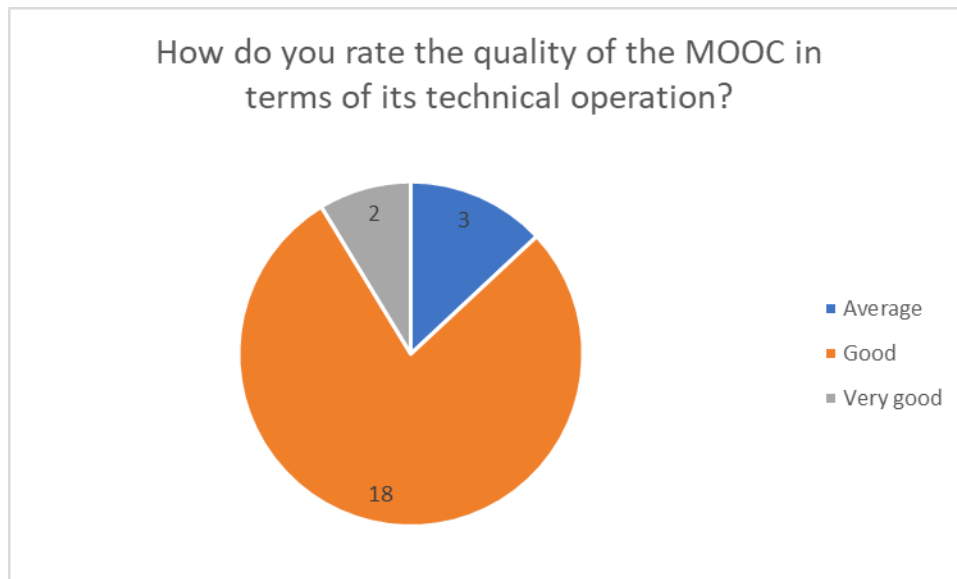


Figure 1. Quality of the MOOC chart.

The second question (“In technical terms, do you think the MOOC could be improved?”) was closely connected to the first one, aiming at better framing possible areas of improvement concerning the technical requirements of the MOOC. Opposite to what could be expected, most of the respondents (17) chose “No”, whereas only 6 said “Yes”. This balances the number of replies that, in the first question, considered that the operability of the MOOC was merely “Good”. Nevertheless, the project team believes that on the whole, these answers indicate that there is still some progress to do regarding the technical components of the MOOC, namely in the areas suggested in the replies to the next answer, where students pointed out the technical aspects that they considered that could be improved: easier navigation, increased interactivity and more options.

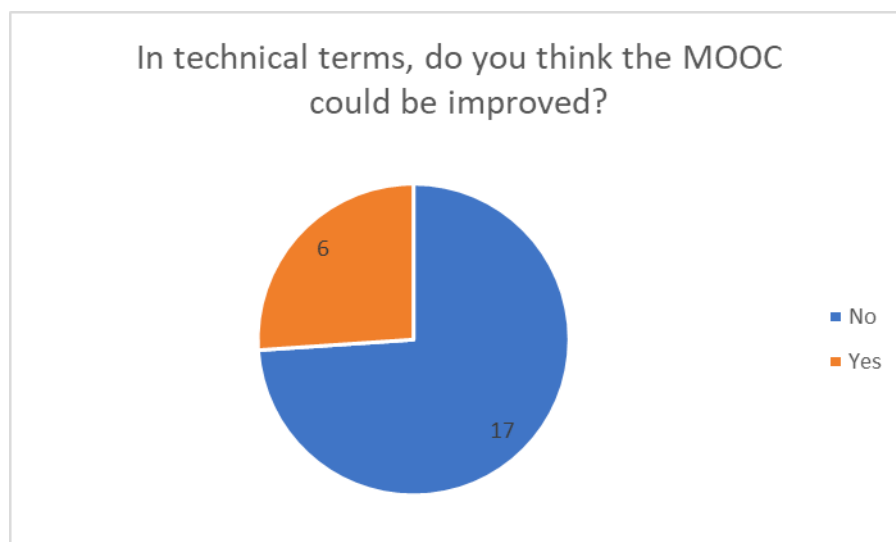


Figure 2. Technical terms MOOC chart.

The students were then asked to state their opinion about the contents of the MOOC on Digital Employability. This part of the survey started with a general question on the interest of the covered contents. Most of the participants said that they were “Interesting” (15 answers), 5 persons considered the most interesting and 3 thought of them as “Neither interesting nor uninteresting”. Nobody chose the options “Uninteresting” nor “Very uninteresting”. This means that the course caught most of the students’ attention, but there still remains a small fringe of people to be reached, either by the improvement of contents, by a different approach towards the online training sessions, or by both.

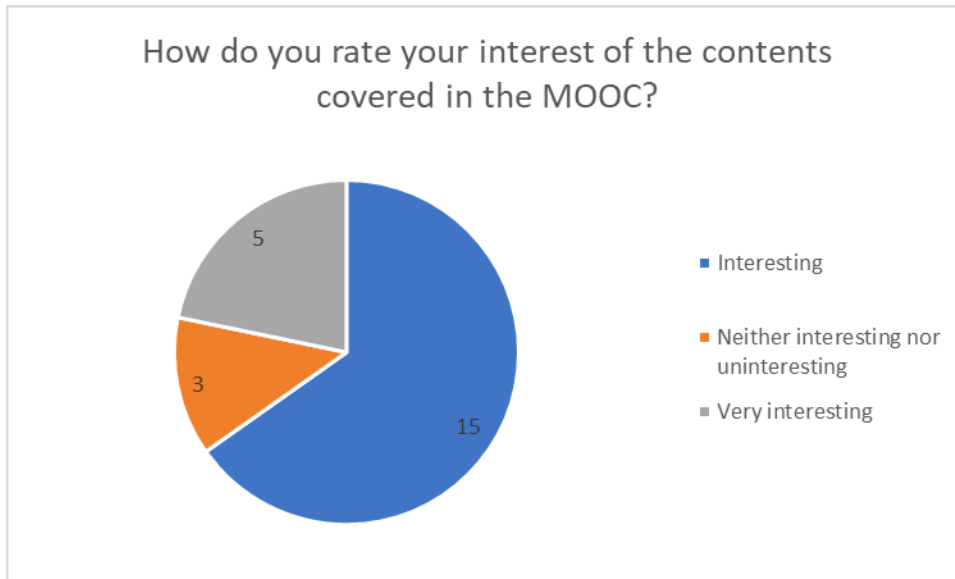


Figure 3. Interest of the MOOC contents chart.

As for the relevance of the contents available in the MOOC on Digital Employability, the majority of the participants classified them as "Relevant" (14 answers), 8 respondents thought that they were "Very Relevant", and 1 considered them as "Slightly Relevant". Nobody chose "Irrelevant" nor "Very irrelevant". The team considered very significant the fact that students realized the relevance of the addressed subjects, since this shows that they are aware of the areas where they must perfect themselves in order to become active and productive citizens.

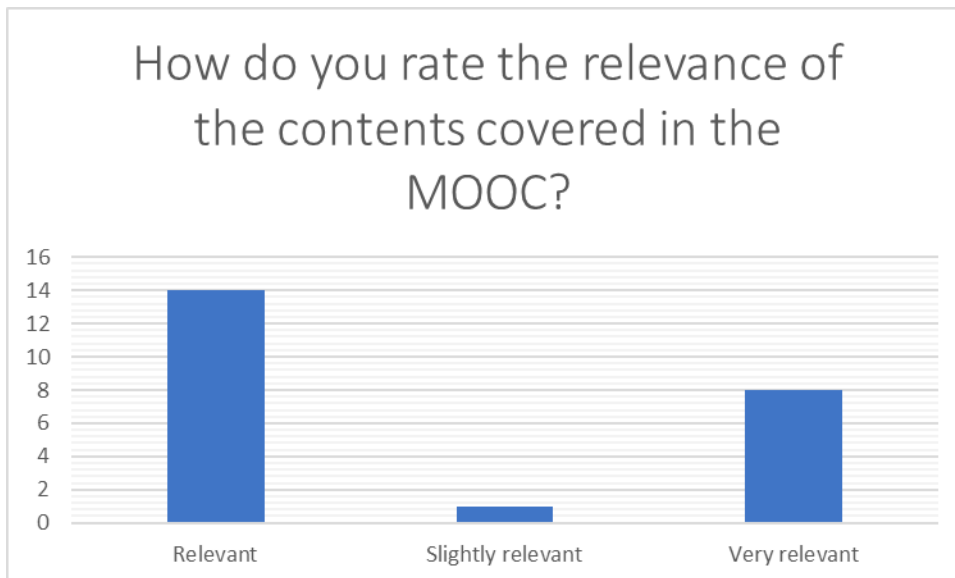


Figure 4. MOOC relevance chart.

The next item considered was the usefulness of the contents. These were mainly rated as "Useful" (16 answers), "Very useful (5 answers) and "Relatively Useful" (2 answers). Once again, nobody chose "Useless" nor "Totally useless". These answers show that students do recognize the importance of the addressed issues, namely for their lives outside school, in the work market, which was considered by the project's team as very positive.

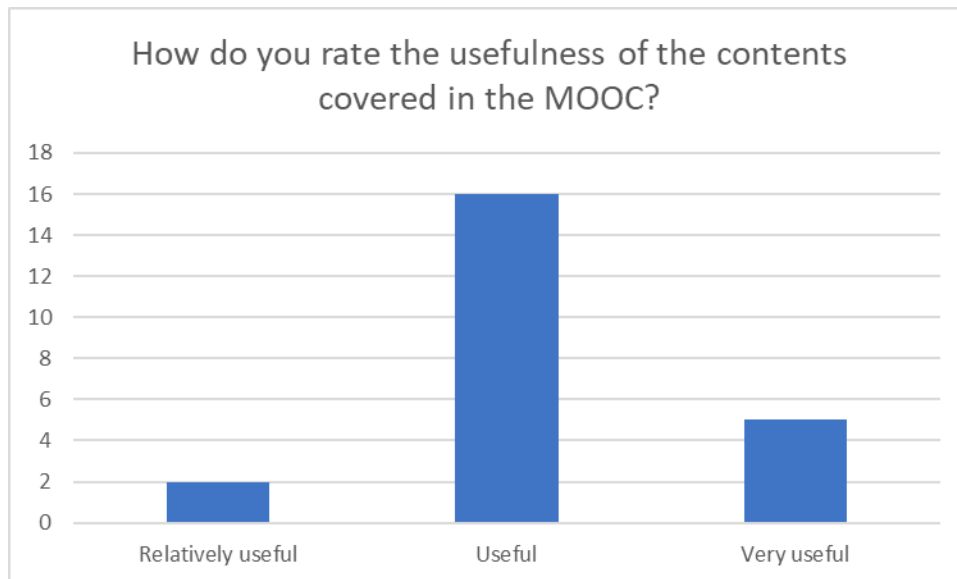


Figure 5. Usefulness of the MOOC contents chart.

Afterwards the questionnaire focused on the three main subjects addressed in order to identify the most appealing ones. Freelancing (11 answers), closely followed by Employability (10 answers) were the most popular. Entrepreneurship was the least chosen option, perhaps because this is a more complex path, and implies more responsibility, namely toward others, as employees. The majority of the respondents seems thus to prefer having their first working experiences on their own or as an employee, in order to first learn the intricacies of their chosen activity. Replies to the next question approached the reasons of the choices. Among the several arguments produced, most students mentioned how important it was for them to learn how to find a job because they valued stability and a regular salary; others underlined their wish to implement a project of their own. Considering that the MOOC probably helped these students to become more aware of the demands of each kind of activity (employability, freelancing and entrepreneurship), and directed them towards a more conscious choice, was particularly rewarding for the project's team.

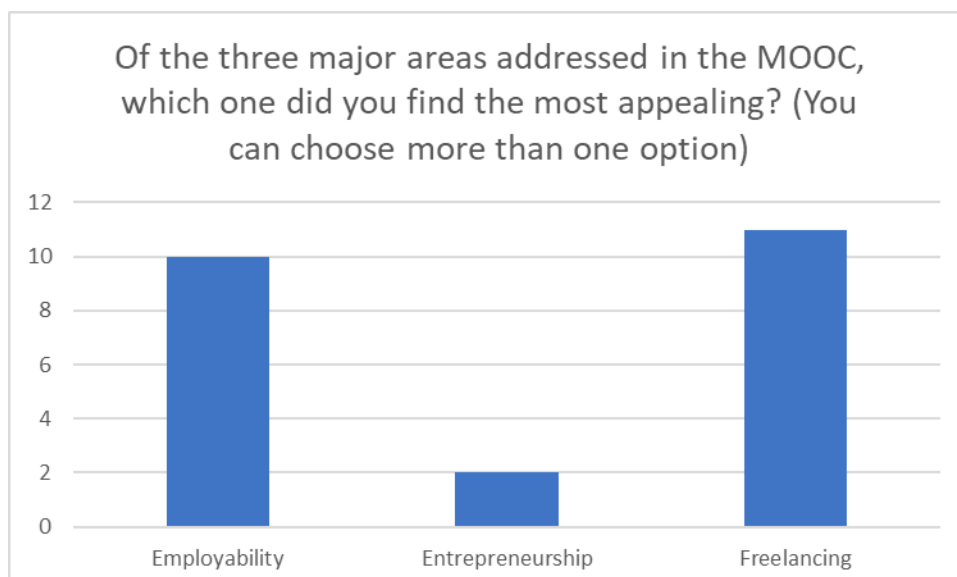


Figure 6. Most appealing areas of the MOOC chart.

The next question complemented the previous, asking "Of the three major areas addressed by the MOOC, in which would you like to engage?". Once again, the most selected answer was Freelancing, but now with 15 replies, followed by Employability (7 replies) and Entrepreneurship (1 reply). These replies confirm the already spotted reluctance regarding Entrepreneurship, and curiously enough show

us that a number of people that opt for being an employee are in fact more attracted by freelancing. The explanations provided by the students valued the idea that a freelancer can be more creative and mainly does what he wishes to do, and that an employee has a steady income. Therefore, we can assume that the appeal for a freer career is often moved away due to the economic instability that it may involve, which, in fact, is a risk of which these students seem to be much aware of.

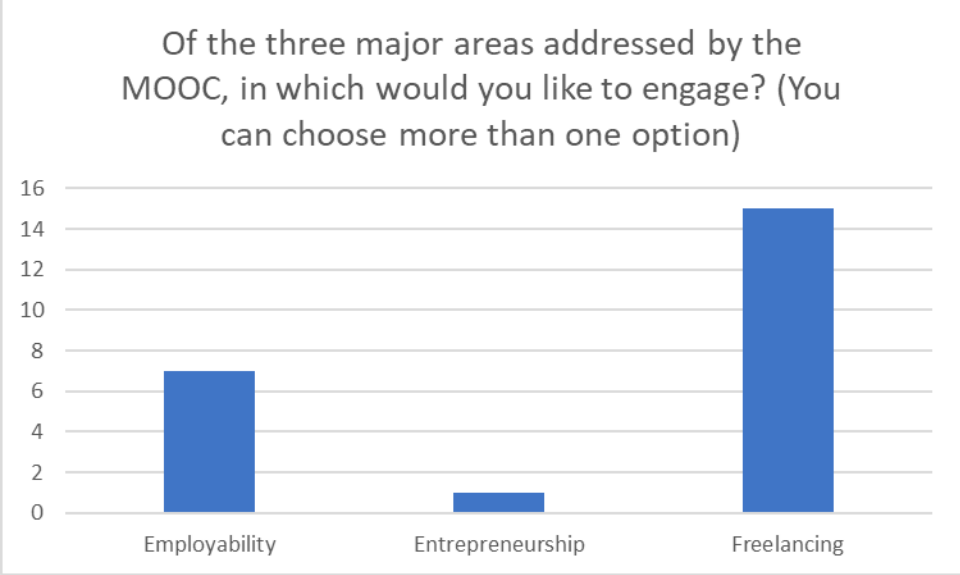


Figure 7. Areas to engage chart.

Close to its' ending, the questionnaire asked students to consider to what degree the MOOC did or did not meet their initial expectations. Almost all the involved trainees said that the course met their expectations (19 answers). Besides, 3 students considered that the MOOC exceeded their expectations and only 1 considered that it was below expectations.

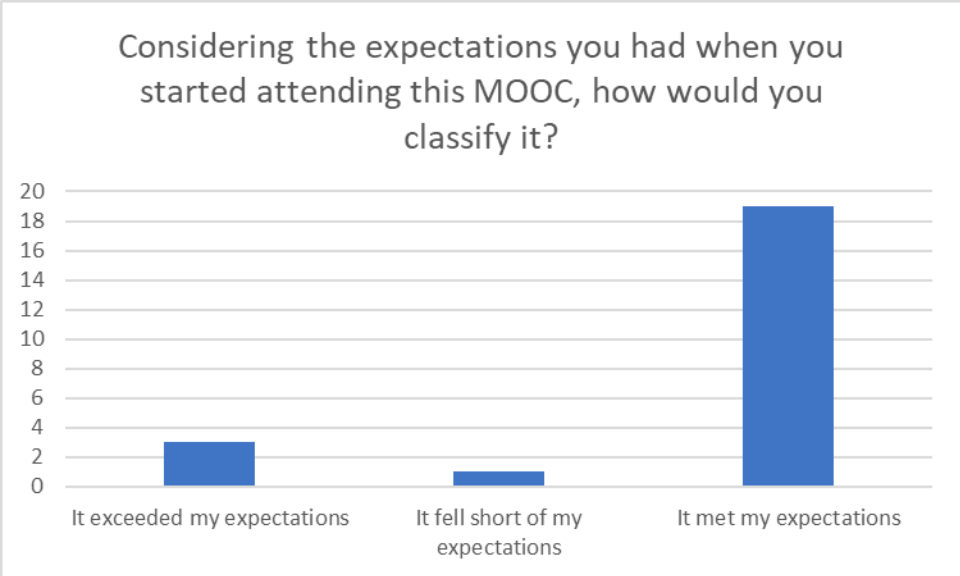


Figure 8. MOOC classification chart.

The positive impact of the MOOC was confirmed by the answers to the last question of the survey, concerning possible areas of improvement. Only one student replied “Yes”, with no further explanations, whereas the large majority responded “No”, which was very gratifying for the project's team since it recognized the quality of the developed product.

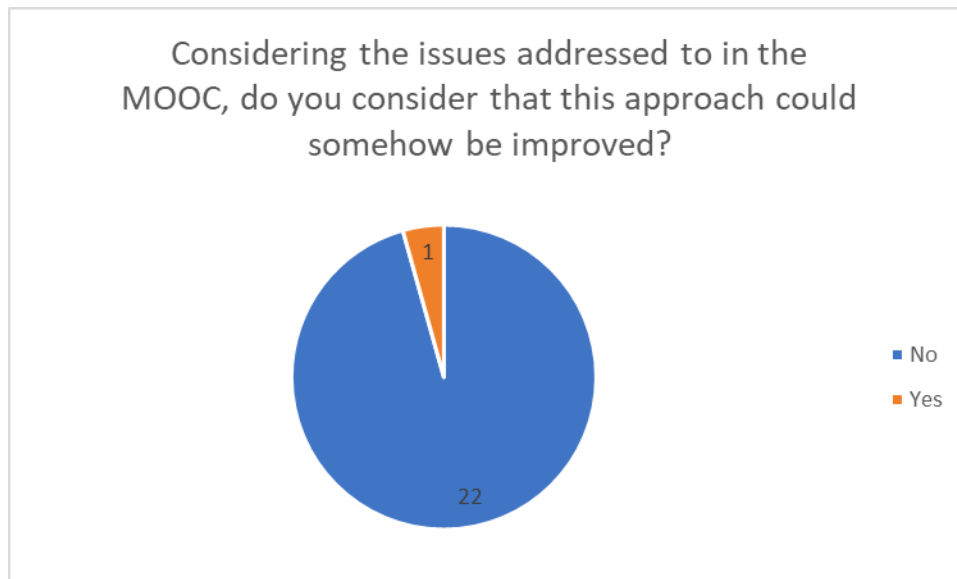


Figure 9. MOOC improvements chart.

3 CONCLUSIONS

The project team considers that the MOOC on Digital Employability was a very positive experience. It's most important aim was reached, which was to raise the students' awareness on a number of issues that will be important for their lives when they leave school and enter the job market, both in terms of the differences among the various possible paths (employability, freelancing and entrepreneurship), and in what concerns the specificities of each one of these ways.

This MOOC also represented an oncoming between business and academia, which is a most valuable asset for students, who did recognize this aspect as they valued the interest, the relevance and the utility of the provided content. The technical operability of the Course was also much appreciated. These various aspects seem to recommend the replication of this MOOC as well as the making of similar ones.

Finally, the project's team was also provided with an insight on the students' expectations and values. Particularly important was the fact that a number of people accepted to give up their wish of a more free and creative work for a stable salary. This seems to be an important issue regarding the dissatisfaction of employees, and may be a fruitful area for future research, because being an employee should not be perceived as constraining and uncreative.