Fulfilling the Promise: Do MOOCs Serve the Educationally Disadvantaged?

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15-year-old Battushing Myanganbayar at home in Mongolia in 2013

And a student at MIT in 2014
Educationally **underserved** people are a **small minority** of MOOC learners.

A small minority of many million people is still **a lot of people**!
MOOCs will change everything! MOOCs will democratize education!
No one finishes MOOCs! These things are terrible!
Huh, completion rates don’t really matter that much for a lot of people. Maybe MOOCs are different than what we first thought?
Hey, who takes these classes anyway, and why?
1. Learners under age 18

2. Learners age 65 and older

3. Learners who said they could not access course content elsewhere
Mixed-Methods (-ish) Research

Quantitative analysis

Qualitative illustrations
Learners Under Age 18
Quotes – Learners Under Age 18

“I am a young girl exploring my interests to potentially decide what I want to do with my life.”

“I just finished high school [and am] making sure I do not slack off academically during my gap year.”

“MOOCs like this have helped me explore topics not available at my high school”
Learners Over Age 65
Quotes – Learners Over Age 65

“I am 73 years old and taking the course because I’m never too old to learn. It helps stimulate by brain, and I think I’ll find the course interesting.”

“I am taking the course as a refresher so I can help my granddaughter with her coursework for nursing school.”

“I worked over 50 years and was not able to afford more schooling after my A.S. These online courses let me explore the subjects I was most interested in now that I have the time to focus on and enjoy them.”
Limited Access Learners
Family & Work

Illness & Disability
Limited Access Learners = Students?

“I am looking forward to this class, as statistical analysis plays a huge role in my chosen PhD program, but the research methods classes I have taken have all been woefully light on any kind of actual analysis training.”

“I studied critical reasoning as part of GMAT preparation, and logic in my undergraduate course, but never quite mastered the basics.”
Conclusions

• MOOCs are supplements to, not replacements for, traditional higher education

• Demographic profiles reflect overall demographic shifts in higher education