

Broadening Participation in Online Learning: Business Perspective of MOOC Providers (2016-2017)

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INTRODUCTION

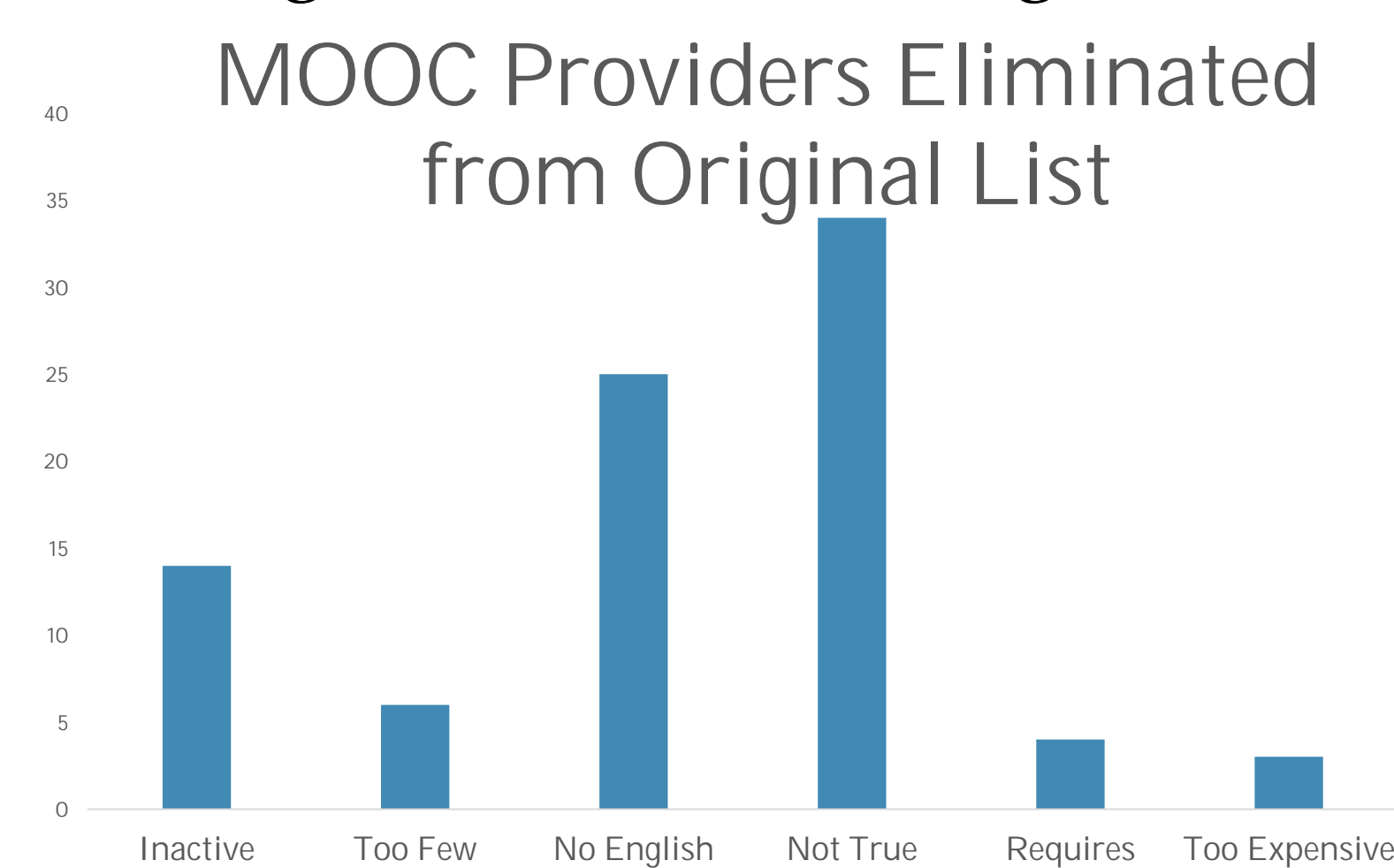
Massive open online courses (MOOCs) have gained a great deal of attention over the past decade for their potential to educate populations who cannot pursue a traditional method of higher education. As these courses have grown in popularity, providers have increased the number of available courses as well as the fees associated with taking courses. Though increased costs have been met with customer complaints, speculation on the economics of MOOCs suggests that for self-sustaining businesses, charging the customers is necessary and may not be sufficient at low costs. However, further increases in fees may result in loss of the accessibility which makes the idea of the MOOC so popular. If course fees pose a significant barrier to enrollment, MOOCs become another economic divide, where the majority of students are wealthy. This project investigates the funding of MOOCs in Spring 2017 and uses the results to consider viability of MOOCs moving forward.

DATA & METHODS

A comprehensive list of 139 MOOC platforms was generated through successive searches on Google. Providers were eliminated if:

- Inactive site (14)
- Fewer than 5 courses offered (6)
- No courses in English (25)
- Formatted courses (including assignments, assessments, or forums) (34)
- Open enrollment process (4)
- Affordable (3)

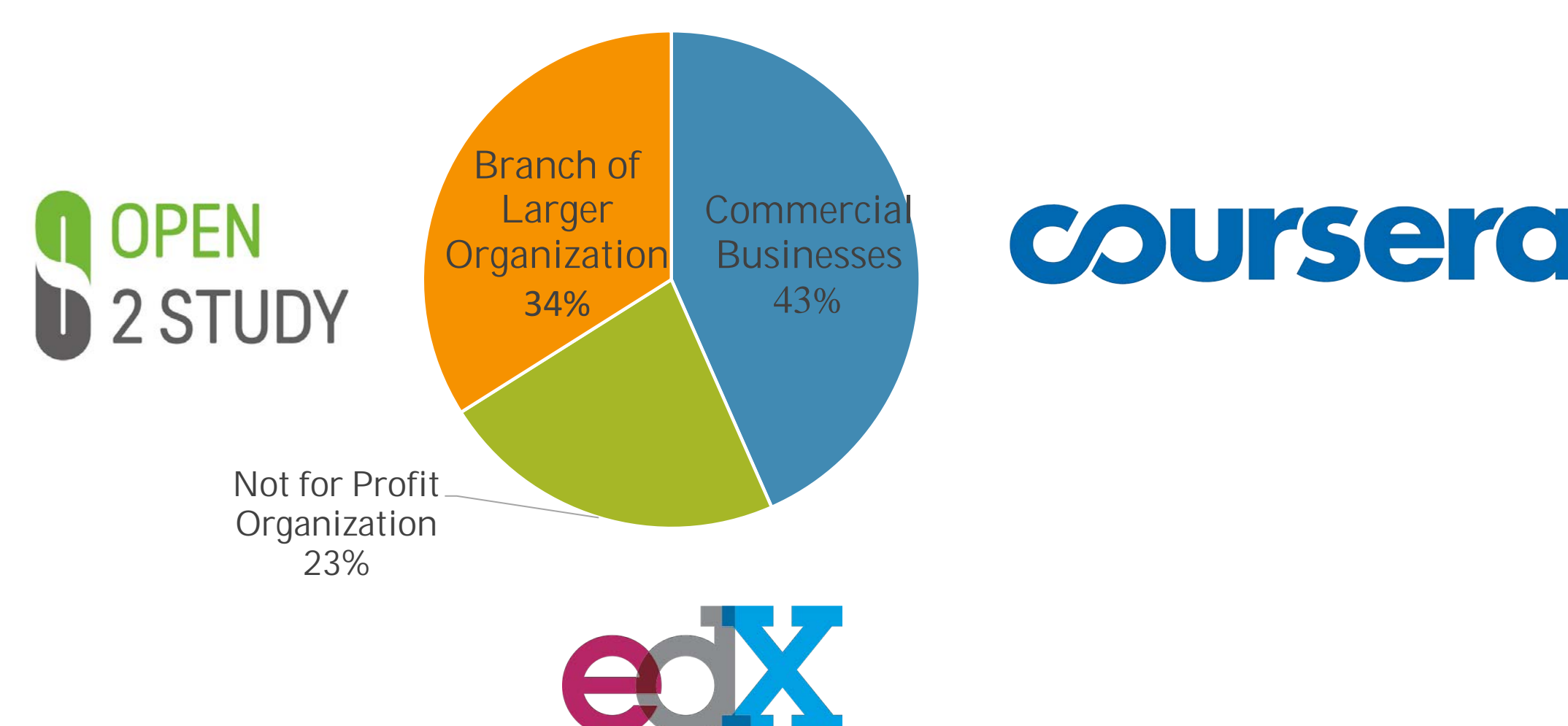
From these criteria, 86 MOOCs were eliminated, resulting in 53 remaining for further investigation



RESULTS

From the list of 86 fitting MOOC platforms, each provider was categorized as falling into one of three business categories. The not-for-profit category includes non-profits, not-for-profits, and projects funded by the government. Providers were considered branches of larger organizations if they were connected to a larger organization with more funds, so these platforms would promote the larger organization even if they were not profitable alone. The third category, independent commercial businesses, would need to generate enough income to be self-sustained.

Business Breakdown of MOOC Platforms



Fee Structure versus Business Classification



Generally, MOOC providers generated income by charging a flat fee for courses, charging for certificates of accomplishment and/or completion, or charging on a subscription basis for access to either a single course or the entire site. Of the 30 platforms charging customers in some form, 17 used flat fees for courses, 15 charged for certificates, and 7 used subscriptions (some platforms used a combination of fees). Some providers did not charge for anything relating to open courses:

- 8 of 12 not-for-profits
- 1 of 23 commercial businesses
- 14 of 18 branches of larger organization

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

Examining the results of this study, the accessibility and viability of MOOC providers can be compared among the three different types of businesses. For all three fee methods, commercial businesses charge customers most often, while not for profit providers and branches of larger organizations are more frequently free. This result is expected, as commercial businesses do not receive outside funding and thus must generate revenue from students, but it does reinforce the principle that providers receiving outside funding are more accessible for students who cannot afford a traditional higher education.

Viability and economic sustainability are equally important factors as accessibility. Though outside funding can allow student to take courses free of charge, such outside donations could be limited, so platforms using such funding likely offer fewer courses than commercial businesses. Data has been collected on the number of courses offered by each platform and will be used to test this hypothesis in the future. Additionally, ten percent of the MOOC platforms listed from the past decade were found to be inactive sites, either because they failed as businesses or ran out of funding. Not all not-for-profit businesses will be sustainable, so commercial businesses should not be entirely discounted simply because they charge fees. Instead, further investigation should explore the price point at which fees pose a significant barrier to entry for customers. Future directions for this work include multiple rounds of open-ended and multiple choice surveys sent out to a variety of courses on all three types of MOOC platforms to gather a broad range of student opinions from varying financial backgrounds.

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