RisiAlbania
Partner for Growth

NEW WAYS OF SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE IT SECTOR: THE CASE OF ALMOOC

INTERVENTION BRIEF

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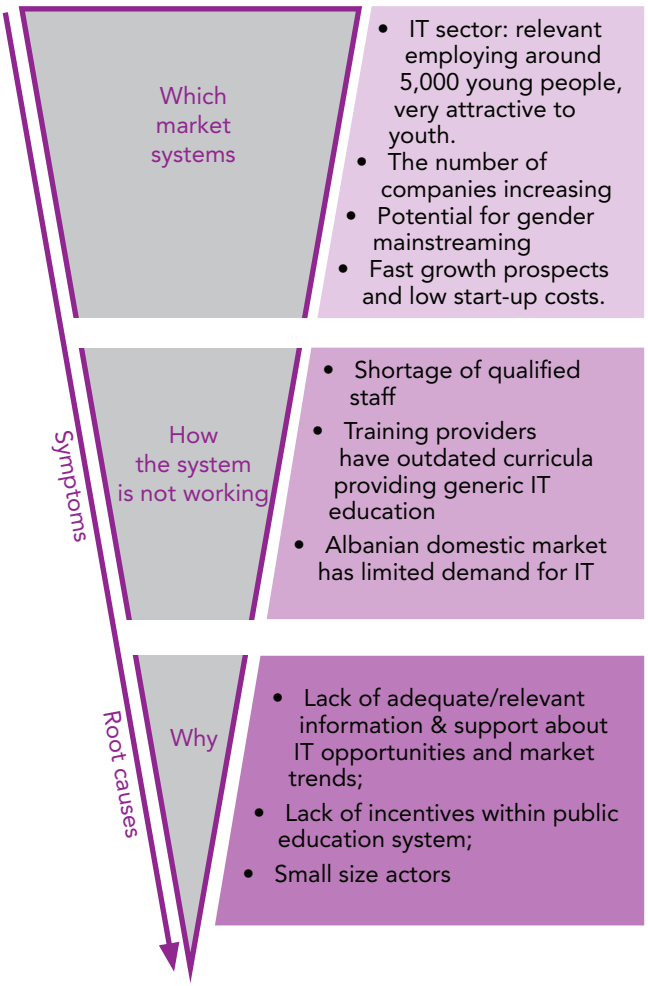
PARTNERSALBANIA FOR CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

NEW WAYS OF SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE IT SECTOR: THE CASE OF ALMOOC

1. Understanding the IT sector in Albania

One of the key constraints in the Albanian IT sector was the shortage of specialized skills, both technical and managerial. There was little advanced expertise in the areas of programming and architecture engineering. The available skills profiles were generally outdated and did not reflect the latest developments in the industry, such as new programming languages or latest applications and technologies (cloud computing, mobile applications, big data, e-commerce, etc.). This was largely the result of generic and out-to-date technical education and a lack of specialized IT training facilities.

Because IT firms could not rely on the formal education to produce skilled IT graduates, many firms had to provide intensive in-house training for graduates - in some cases lasting up to one year, in order to enable graduates to undertake concrete tasks in the firm. This came at a high cost to IT firms, posing a significant threat to their profitability.

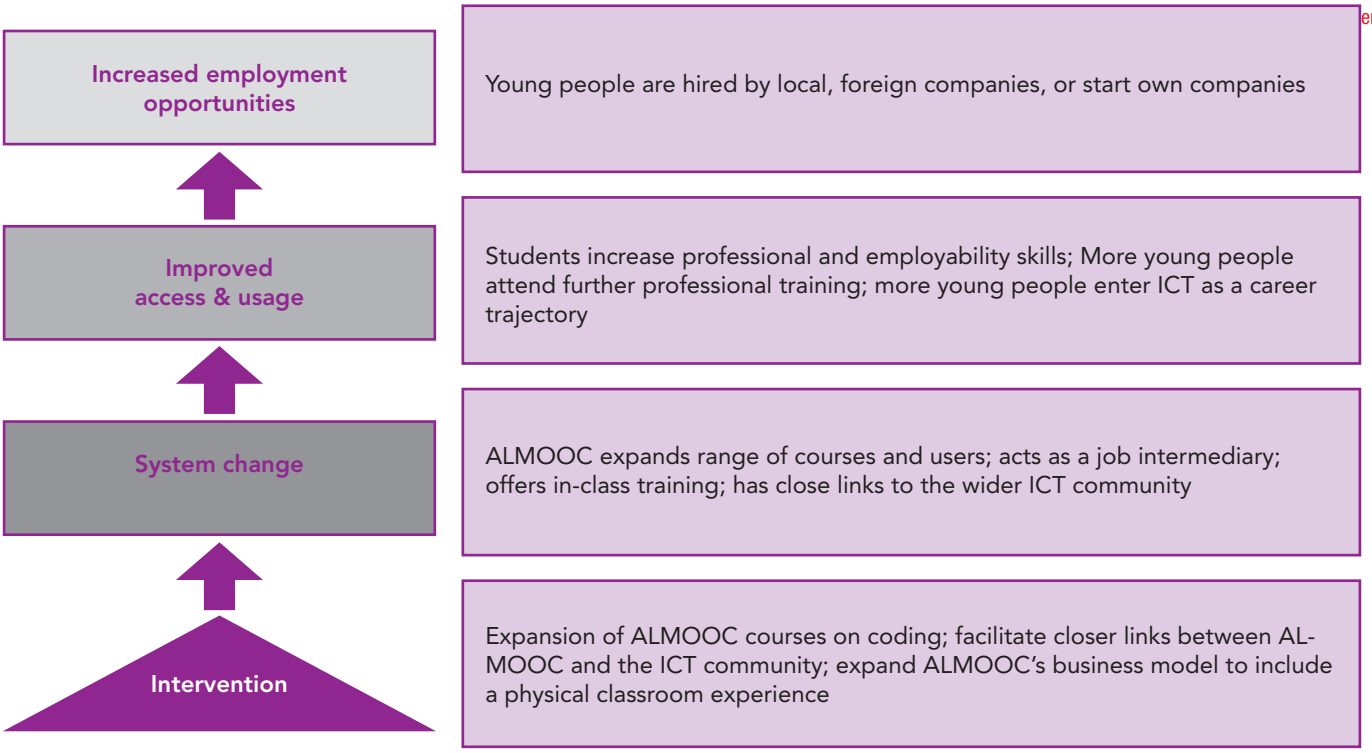


2. Strategy and Vision

Recognizing that it was not feasible for the project to catalyze changes in the formal education system – particularly as Albania is at the critical juncture of becoming an IT outsourcing destination where prompt action is required - the project decided to collaborate with the private sector. RisiAlbania partnered with the country's first Massive Open Online Course (MOOC): ALMOOC (www.almooc.com), which was launched by an Albanian-American IT entrepreneur.

MOOCs are a global educational trend whereby courses on any subject are offered free of charge. Indeed, the use of MOOCs brings about several advantages: they offer demand-driven courses, come at a low cost, and the pace of the course is solely decided by the student. IT courses in particular are popular among MOOC users, as it allows IT novices to enter a highly lucrative career path. Indeed, ALMOOC's goal was to spot talented, aspiring IT professionals who could be hired by the software company, Real Visualz, the IT company owned by American-Albanian the ALMOOC investor.

RisiAlbania's vision was **to foster the expansion of ALMOOC so that it would serve the skills needs of the wider IT community**. As such, the project assisted ALMOOC in expanding its course offers to include up-to-date programming languages that were in high-demand by a range of IT companies. This, the project believed, would help increase the employability of young people in Albania as well as reduce the training costs to IT companies.



RisiAlbania's strategy to support ALMOOC comprised four key thrusts:

1. Expand the courses offered by ALMOOC so the platform could become a training vehicle for as many aspiring IT professionals as possible, thereby closing the IT skills gap. RisiAlbania's assistance helped accelerate this process – without the project support, this would have taken a longer period of time.
2. Share and devise business models with ALMOOC to set up a physical facility and provide in class courses based on demand.
3. Link ALMOOC with the wider ICT community and initiatives such as incubators or innovation centers that will be set up and enable it to respond to their training/skills needs.
4. Promote the use of ALMOOC by other training providers to develop and place online courses.

3. Implementation

RisiAlbania's support to ALMOOC included several steps that aimed at making the platform an effectivve learning tool, enhance the IT skills of young Albanians and make them more employable for IT companies such as Real Visualz.

- **Market research:** In order to ensure that ALMOOC courses would benefit the wider development community, RisiAlbania supported an extensive survey assessing the skills demand of IT companies Albania. This helped ensure that ALMOOC courses would offer relevant, market-driven IT courses.
- **Supporting the expansion of coding courses:** The project assisted ALMOOC in bringing in expert instructors from the USA, Kosovo and Albania to help develop new courses featuring up-to-date software engineering technologies such as Java and Ruby on Rail. The course curricula were built by leading practitioners with industry experience, which ensured that ALMOOC users would receive practical and demand-driven training.
- **Promoting wider access:** RisiAlbania facilitated the promotion of ALMOOC to local public and private universities, colleges, and training centers with IT programs. In so doing, the project helped to strengthen the platform's outreach as well as sought to instill more up-to-date curricula in educational institutions.

4. Results

In just three years, AlMOOC was able to drastically transform the IT skills landscape in Albania. As the ALMOOC director, Pasho Toska, states: "In the beginning we offered a limited number of courses and we only had a couple of hundred students. Today, we have increased this number to 8,300 users of the coding platform."

While ALMOOC initially offered all its courses for free, it has started to introduce a fee structure for a few selected courses in early 2017. The new business model is expected to increase the platform's sustainability.

The great advantage of MOOCs is that they are accessible from anywhere. RisiAlbania discovered that reduced barriers of access means that many more women take advantage of ALMOOC: more than 42% of trainees completing and submitting course projects are in fact girls. One of them Romina Shqypi, who studies ICT at the Faculty of Natural Sciences of University of Tirana, explains how ALMOOC provides the extra-edge to improve her IT skills: "In school we learn the basic language of programming, C, while today Node JS is mostly used in this sector. We need to be updated with the latest development on technology"- says Romina, who has now joined the ALMOOC Cloud Zone team in Tirana.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE:

- More than 8500 users (42 % women), with over 1330 projects submitted.
- 105 ALMOOC users were employed by Real Visualz and other IT companies
- ALMOOC increased the number of courses from 10 to 26 courses (within a period of 1 year)
- ALMOOC has begun to diversify its services: it launched a job board on its platform, listing full-time and freelance jobs available at Real Visualz and other American IT companies. ALMOOC is thus becoming an intermediary between job seekers and IT companies

5. Lessons Learned

- **Acting as a facilitator:** A diaspora investor needs to partner with local actors in order increase local market outreach and add value to services – a facilitator such as RisiAlbania can help do that. Indeed, cooperation with local IT firms and educational institutions, which RisiAlbania helped facilitate, assisted ALMOOC in increasing its presence in Albania.
- **Being the first-mover means accepting risks:** When RisiAlbania partnered with ALMOOC, the concept of MOOCs was novel in Albania, and had plenty of skeptics. However, convinced of the change ALMOOC could trigger in Albania's IT landscape and Real Visualz's financial commitment to the endeavor, the project supported the platform despite a lack of previous best practice experience. Taking this risk paid off!
- **Project support serves as an accelerator:** Supporting ALMOOC in adding new courses sped up the timeframe within which new courses could be offered, which meant the IT skills gap was addressed more quickly.
- **Online training can trigger more up-to-date classroom learning:** By being more closely connected to local IT companies in Albania, AlMOOC initiated a training center called Cloudzone in partnership with Nettrade, a local IT company managing the largest e-commerce portal in Albania. The training center will offer in-class training to staff of Albanian IT companies.
- **Diversification is key:** To strengthen its sustainability, ALMOOC needs to offer a range of services – from online, class room training, job intermediation to talent recruitment for other IT companies.

RisiAlbania was established in 2013 to address the problem ofyouth unemployment in Albania. The project was established bythe Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and isimplemented by a consortium of partners consisting of HELVETASSwiss Intercooperation and Partners Albania. The 4 year projecthas two main pillars. The first focuses on job creation throughgrowth in specific sectors (tourism, agriculture and ICT) and thesecond focuses on improved labour market information andintermediation services.

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