# Digital Commerce course:
## a five-year assessment

November, 2021

# Impressum

**Digital Commerce course: a five-year assessment**

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**DiPLO**     Geneva Internet Platform

**Jovan Kurbalija**
*Director of DiploFoundation and Head of the Geneva Internet Platform*

Five years ago, the Digital Commerce course was launched with a very concrete goal: to assist trade professionals to better understand what digitisation and the internet bring to trade negotiations and help them reap the benefits of the digital economy. Over the years, the course has helped them navigate an ever more complex digital commerce agenda, which currently encompasses a vast range of issues, from trade facilitation to data protection and cross-border data flows.

Our capacity development has prepared professionals to operate in a scenario in which 'complexity' is the 'new normal'. It has done so by adopting a multidisciplinary approach, built upon informed, impartial, and inclusive discussions. Course materials have evolved as fast as the digital commerce agenda itself, reflecting this dynamic policy area. The exchange among participants has been extremely rich, not only expressing the regional diversity of our alumni, but also reflecting a wide range of views on digital commerce and digital policy.

In 2021, capacity building on digital commerce is more important than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only led to the expansion of e-commerce, but also to a better understanding of the bottlenecks that prevent developing countries and least developed countries (LDCs) from fully benefiting from the digitalised economy.

Awareness about the importance of e-commerce enablers, including regulatory frameworks, has been enhanced. As a consequence, negotiations at the regional and multilateral levels have gained momentum. This increases the importance of the involvement of developing countries and LDCs in trade discussions and negotiations, strengthening development-oriented priorities.

The Digital Commerce course has filled a crucial gap in the e-commerce capacity building landscape by providing policy-oriented support for government officials. Its impact can be gauged not only from the words and testimonies of our alumni - some of them captured in this publication - but also from the results of anonymous surveys conducted with students throughout the years. These surveys show how the course has played a role in enhancing knowledge, the ability to take part in digital commerce discussions and to play a leadership role in diplomatic processes in this area.

In the field of digital commerce, there are still many 'unknowns' for both developed and developing countries. Many unanswered questions remain. The search for answers will be high on the agenda of trade diplomats and professionals. Our capacity development has contributed towards making future trade debates more informed and inclusive.

# Foreword

**Rashid S Kaukab**
*Executive Director*

It is not a cliché that the world is going digital.  It is a reality that is happening and transforming the ways in which we produce, exchange and consume.  "Digital divide" too is not a cliché but a reality.   Not all countries, communities, enterprises and individuals are equally prepared to participate in and benefit from the digital transformation. Stakeholders in smaller developing countries and LDCs are particularly at the risk of being left further behind. They need assistance at many levels including to build the capacity: to better understand the relevant issues in a fast-evolving situation, to develop and implement relevant rules and regulations, and to effectively participate in the ongoing discussions and negotiations, for example, at the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Our course on digital commerce has been a contribution to build this capacity among policy makers, negotiators and other relevant stakeholders from smaller developing and least-developed countries.  Through a number of iterations over five years, each based on learnings from the previous versions, we endeavoured to equip them with the up-to-date, neutral and objective knowledge in a user-friendly and interactive format. It has been heartening to see the overwhelming response and the positive feedback, confirming that such endeavours are needed and appreciated.  We undertook the development and implementation of this course with limited resources and the impacts – as outlined in this publication – are impressive by any standards.

While encouraged by the response and results so far, we are also fully conscious of the magnitude of the demand which remains unmet.  If anything, the delivery of the course in the past five years has demonstrated the huge need for such interventions to build capacity of policy makers, negotiators and other relevant stakeholders in smaller developing and least-developed countries.  This need is all the more urgent given the fast pace of the development of digital commerce and the progress in international negotiations, particularly at the WTO.

We will continue our efforts in the coming years.  Here is a real opportunity to make a difference and narrow the "digital divide".  We are confident that our development assistance partners will support us in doing more and better.

# Foreword



**Rajesh Aggarwal**
*Director (oic), Division for Market Development*

In a post-pandemic world, digital technologies are increasingly transforming the way we live and work. Changes are happening at an accelerated speed, imposing new challenges on companies – to keep up their competitiveness in a rapidly digitizing business world – as well as on governments – to respond to and encourage innovations from a regulatory perspective. This new and dynamic environment requires all stakeholders being more strategic and inclusive than ever as to ensure not leaving anyone behind across or within countries.

As a joint agency of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, ITC supports Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) around the world build capacities and connect them to the global market. ITC embraces the digital reality and works for transforming digital disruption into business opportunities, especially for MSMEs in developing countries. A focus on digital commerce is embedded into all ITC offerings, from our flagship report on SME Competitiveness, to sector specific strategies and e-commerce studies, as well as technical assistance projects on the ground.

Digital commerce calls for greater cooperation among countries on rules and regulations. Geneva is a global centre for trade policy and digital commerce, where several international organisations deal with these themes from different angles according to their respective mandates.

The joint course on digital commerce with Diplo Foundation, CUTS International and GIP that has been running for the past five years is an important initiative to equip policymakers with the up-to-date knowledge and increase awareness and understanding of issues related to digital commerce, to help participants better engage in the policy discussions and make informed decisions.

This course has allowed for a common space to explore the connection between trade and ICT related issues, such as net neutrality, cybersecurity, consumer protection and data flow, among others. It also allowed for exploring the development implications of key issues in the digital economy, such as competition and market concentration, standardisation, and infrastructure development.

We're heartened to see that the course has been highly recognized by the participants and regarded as providing substantive contributions to support policy deliberations. ITC is proud of having actively supported this initiative.

Capacity building is key for developing countries to acquire necessary knowledge and skills to keep up competitiveness in the digital economy. With the accelerated digital transformation, the need is more urgent than ever to bridge the digital gap and prevent it from further widening. We look forward to continuing working with partner agencies and stakeholders to reinforce our efforts to support developing countries in building competitiveness in the digital economy.

# Digital policies are at the heart of e-commerce

Technology has significantly transformed the world economy. The digitisation of information and the ability to make data flow worldwide have **enabled new business models and transformed the composition of trade**. On the one hand, digitisation is leading to the dematerialisation of products that have been previously commercialised as physical objects, while on the other, digital flows underpin and enable every other kind of traditional cross-border flow. Even when ships carry physical products, customers still engage in e-commerce, as they increasingly retrieve, order, and pay for them online, generating a significant stream of cross-border data.

The relevance of e-commerce to the global economy has become even more acute with the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the **expansion of e-commerce towards new firms, customers, and types of products**. The digitalisation of trade has brought about numerous advantages for businesses and consumers, such as the convenience of online shopping, increased consumer choice, access to different markets, and less time-consuming online banking and e-payment operations.

At the same time, the rapid growth of e-commerce also has made clear that **the ability to benefit from these opportunities varies significantly** across different levels of e-commerce readiness. Awareness about the importance of e-commerce enablers, including regulatory frameworks, has been enhanced.

In this scenario, **policymakers and regulators are confronted with the limitations of existing international trade norms**. These norms have been built upon concepts that become much more fluid in the digital space, such as 'cross-border flows', 'goods and services', and 'services sectors'. This leads to a sense of urgency in developing frameworks that take into account the impact of digitalisation on e-commerce.

Negotiations at the regional and multilateral levels have gained momentum, seeking to fill existing gaps by tackling the growing interplay between digital governance and trade policy. As a consequence, e-commerce negotiations have also increased in complexity. **The digital trade agenda now encompasses both traditional trade topics (e.g., trade facilitation) and several digital policy issues**, such as cross-border data flows and data localisation, online consumer protection and privacy, cybersecurity, and access to the source code of computer programs.

At the WTO, discussions on e-commerce are taking place in two parallel tracks: the **WTO Work Programme on Electronic Commerce**, launched in 1998, and the **Joint Statement Initiative (JSI) on E-commerce,** which aims to produce a binding agreement among a subset of WTO members. The negotiating agenda of the JSI includes provisions on all aforementioned digital policy issues.

While multilateral discussions are ongoing, the regulatory environment for digital trade has in practice been shaped by regional trade agreements. **Out of the 348 agreements entered into force between 2000 and 2020, 185 contain provisions relevant to digital trade**; 110 have specific e-commerce provisions and 80 have dedicated e-commerce chapters. Some recent examples of this trend include the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA), signed by Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore. In Africa, the Assembly of the African Union has decided to fast-track e-commerce negotiations under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

This new scenario has brought challenges from the perspective of trade negotiators and practitioners. A reasonable degree of technical understanding is required to develop adequate regulation on issues such as data flows and source code. Moreover, the governance of data is a cutting-edge policy area in which developed and developing countries alike are still struggling to find effective and holistic regulatory mechanisms.

In this context, **trade negotiators and policymakers can highly benefit from a multidisciplinary approach to capacity building**, which tackles most of the digital policy issues currently on the e-commerce agenda from policy and technical standpoints. This is the approach that underpins the Digital Commerce course offered by Diplo, the International Trade Center (ITC), CUTS International, Geneva, and the Geneva Internet Platform (GIP).



*As we continue to witness the transition towards a digital economy, it is becoming increasingly important to be equipped with the requisite technical knowledge relating to e-commerce and internet governance. As such, I highly recommend that other diplomats and technocrats working in the field of international relations and diplomacy consider participating in the course on digital commerce.*

***Rashaun Watson**, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Jamaica to the United Nations and other International Organizations in Geneva (May 2020)*

# Digital commerce: a course guided by the needs of policy makers

The Digital Commerce course was first introduced in 2017 to address a practical need: to assist governmental and non-governmental actors – especially in developing countries and least developed countries (LDCs) – to better understand the implications that digitisation brings to trade discussions, to help them design policies and negotiating positions fit for the needs of their countries, and to understand how global rules can facilitate development. Five years after the start of the course, **this need is more urgent than ever**.

There are growing concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the relevance of pre-existing physical and legal bottlenecks that served as barriers to e-commerce in developing countries and LDCs, and enhanced the risk posed by rising digital inequalities. This increases the importance of the involvement of these countries in trade discussions and negotiations, reinforcing development-oriented priorities.



Most editions of the Digital Commerce course were specially targeted at e-commerce negotiators and policymakers from developing countries and LDCs, based in Geneva or in capitals, with the capacity to bring about the real impact in their countries' policy development on e-commerce. According to the respondents of a tracer survey conducted with former participants of the Digital Commerce course (2017-2021), **the knowledge acquired through the course allowed them to participate more effectively in trade-related policy discussions and negotiations**, as can be seen in *Graphic 1*.

Graphic 1. Impact of the course on participants' ability to take part in e-commerce policy discussions

Course participants particularly benefit from:

- The **multidisciplinary knowledge** of course partners and faculty, with extensive experience in the fields of international trade, digital policies, and internet governance.
- A **thematic approach** that covers the increasing interplay between trade and digital policy issues.
- **Technical knowledge** of aspects related to the functioning of the internet, without going into unnecessary detail, but focusing on what is important for current e-commerce policy discussions.
- A **cross-cutting emphasis on development**, which highlights challenges and examples from developing countries and LDCs.
- Access to **fact-based and neutral** information.
- An **innovative and highly interactive methodology**, which allows them to immediately apply new knowledge in daily routines.
- The **just-in-time nature** of the course. Discussions and analyses also cover breaking news and the most recent developments.
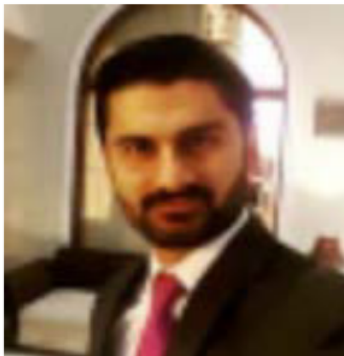


*The course has been an excellent source of information and up-to-date knowledge on the various paradigms of digital commerce. For developing countries, like Pakistan, such capacity building opportunities are mandatory.*

**Waqas Hassan**
*Assistant Director (International Liaison & Training), Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (December, 2017)*

As a reflection of its 'just-in-time' approach, in 2021 the course extensively covered key digital policy issues being discussed in the context of the JSI, in preparation for the 12th World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference (MC12). The syllabus and materials for the course were carefully designed to answer the pressing needs of digital commerce practitioners by exploring in-depth key issues in the JSI e-commerce policy agenda, such as:

- cross-border data flows and data localisation
- network neutrality
- online consumer protection and privacy
- unsolicited commercial electronic messages (spam)
- open government data
- customs duties on electronic transmissions
- cybersecurity
- access to the source code of computer programs

Regular surveys conducted with the alumni at the end of each course show their opinion about course materials. **Respondents assessed the extent to which the materials were relevant, up-to-date, and covered different viewpoints on policy issues**, as displayed in *Graphic 2*.
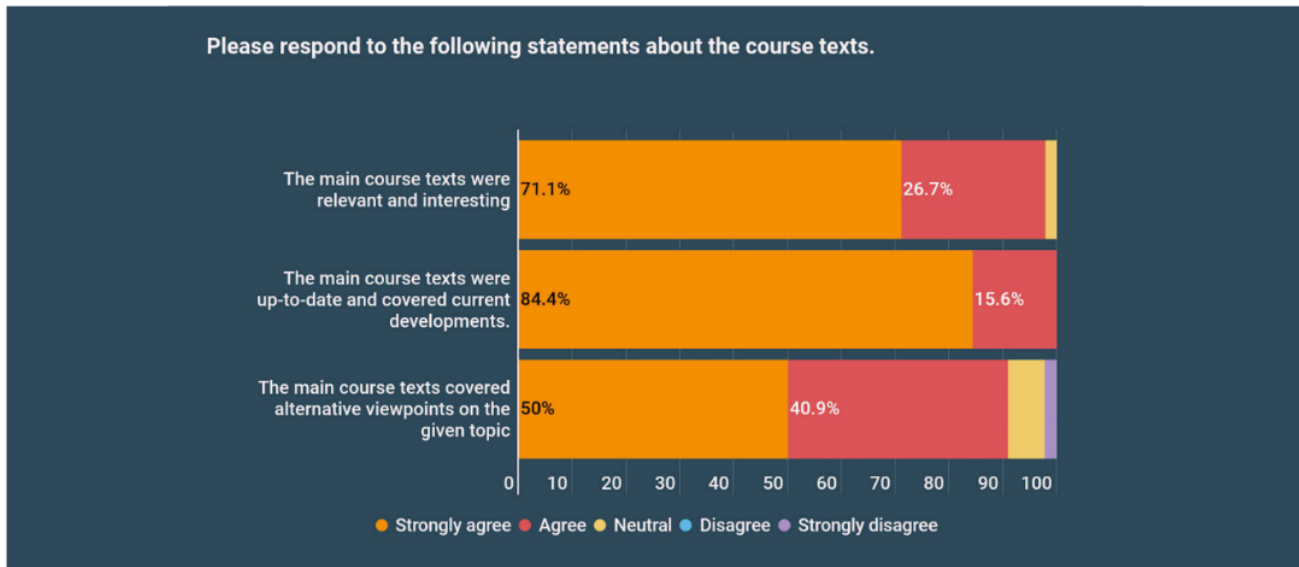


*Graphic 2. Participants' views on course materials*

*The course is extremely useful for negotiators involved in e-commerce discussions at the WTO as well as for policymakers and advisors.*

**Edouard Bizumuremyi**
**Commercial Counsellor, The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Rwanda in Geneva**

According to participants, **the course helped not only to expand their knowledge on e-commerce issues** (Graphic 3), **but also to boost their practical involvement and leadership in e-commerce policy discussions** (Graphic 4).
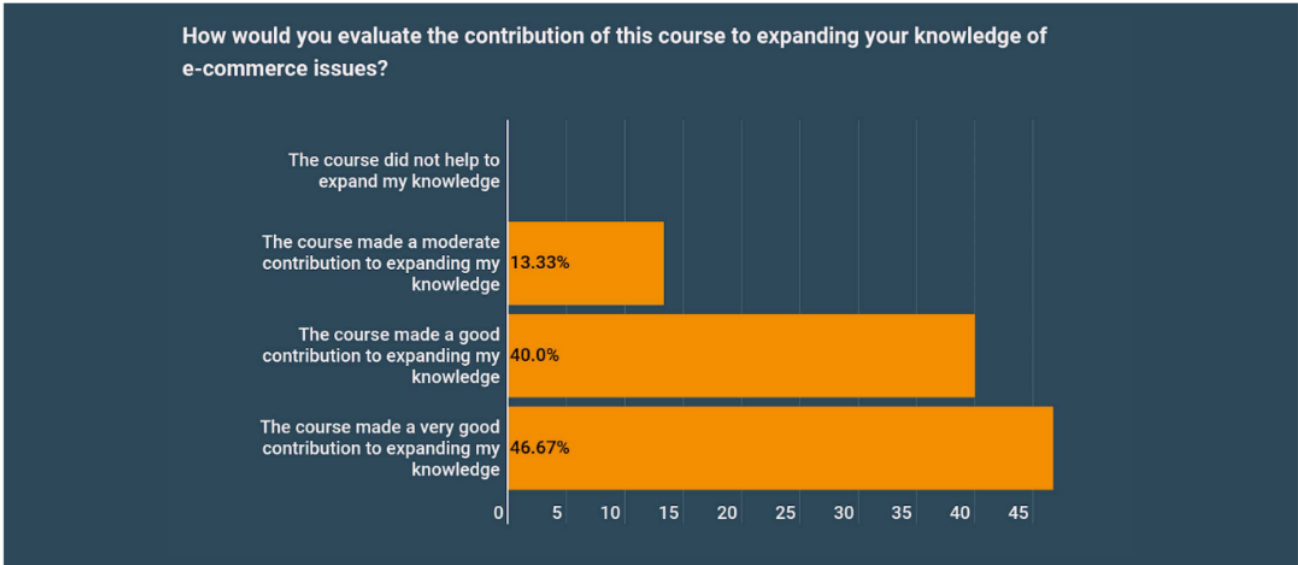


*Graphic 3. Impact of the course on participants' knowledge of e-commerce issues*
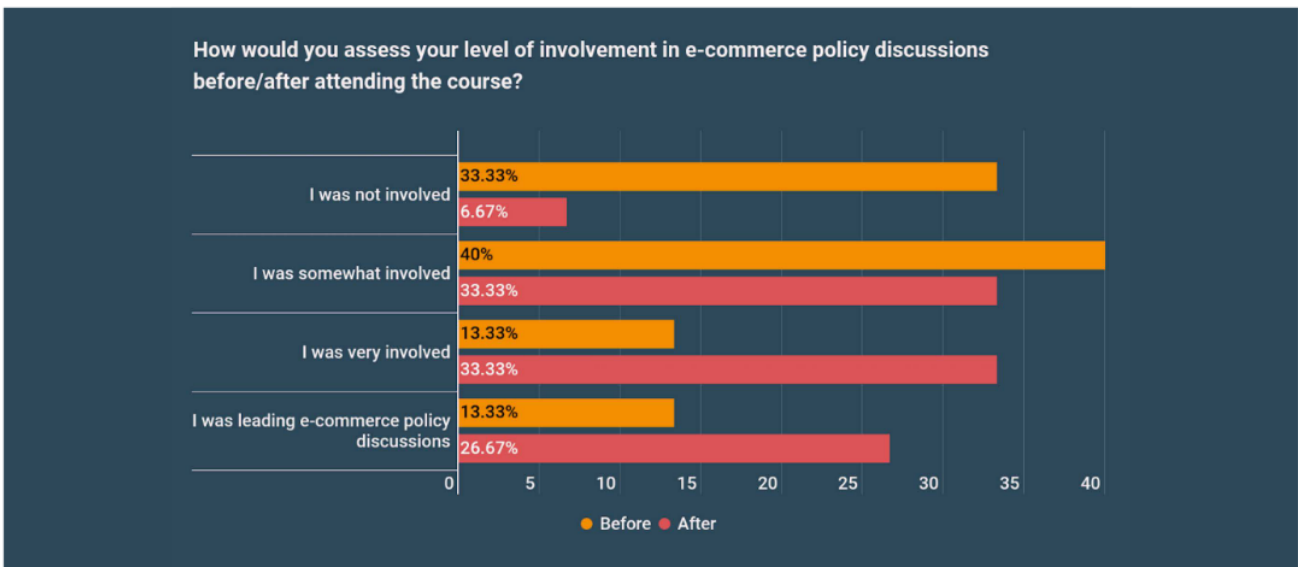


*Graphic 4. Impact of the course on participants' involvement in e-commerce policy discussions*

**Before the course**, 33% of respondents of the tracer survey said they were not involved in e-commerce policy discussions, while 13% were leading policy discussions. When respondents assessed the situation **after the course**, there was an increase in involvement all across the board. Only 6% remained not involved in policy discussions, while 26% were in leadership positions. There was also a significant increase in the number of former participants who were 'very involved in policy discussions', from 13% to 33%.

*For me as a diplomat covering e-commerce issues in the WTO, the course came just in time (...) The knowledge obtained during the course helped me to fill the basic knowledge gap and to be able to communicate on the same track with other more advanced colleagues.*

**Array Kassabekova,**
*First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan to the UNOG and other International Organizations in Geneva (March 2018)*

# Digital Commerce course in a snapshot

The Digital Commerce course was offered over five editions between 2017 and 2021, as follows:

**First edition (May-June 2017):** A six-week blended learning course, combining online and face-to-face interaction, was offered to Geneva-based diplomats and e-commerce practitioners.

**Second edition (September-November 2017):** An eight-week course was conducted entirely online, offered to capital-based officials, policymakers, and non-governmental actors from developing countries and LDCs.

**Third edition (January-March 2018):** A six-week blended learning course was offered to Geneva-based staff from permanent missions of developing countries and LDCs.

**Fourth edition (October-December 2019):** An eight-week blended learning course, combining online and face-to-face interaction, was offered to Geneva-based diplomats and e-commerce practitioners.

**Firth edition (May-June 2021):** A six-week course was conducted entirely online, offered to capital-based officials and policymakers from developing countries and LDCs.

**More than 300 applications were received from 98 countries across the globe**. The demand was particularly strong in Africa and Asia. African individuals accounted for 124 applications (40%), while Asian individuals accounted for 86 (28%). 81 individuals from 28 LDCs applied to the course, accounting for 26% of applications. **These figures attest to the relevance of capacity building in e-commerce for developing countries and LDCs** and the willingness of individuals to enrol in training in this area.
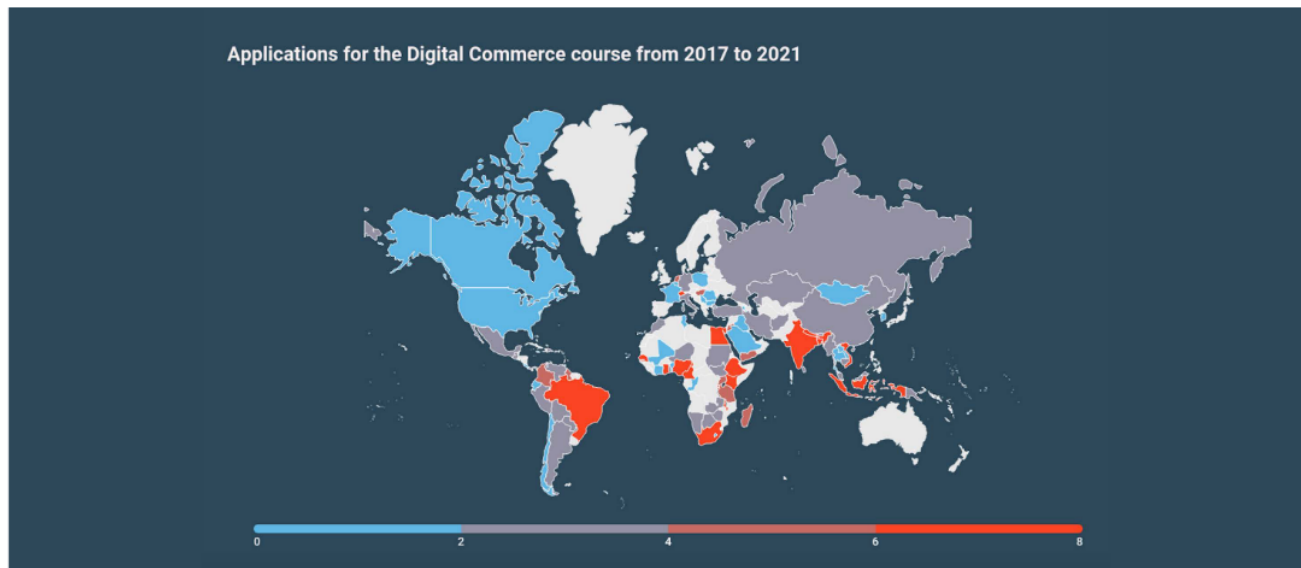


*Graphic 5. Geographical distribution of applications for the Digital Commerce course*

Several criteria were taken into account when selecting applications, such as regional diversity, previous experience and professional involvement in trade policy and e-commerce, and gender balance. While some courses were open to individuals from developed and developing countries alike, others were offered exclusively to developing countries and LDCs to cater to their specific needs and to allow for a sharper focus on development issues. Most courses were specially targeted at policymakers and trade negotiators directly involved in e-commerce. In order to ensure a high level of interaction throughout the course, each class was limited to 23-27 participants.

**Throughout the years, the Digital Commerce course trained 138 individuals from 72 countries.** The most represented regions among course participants were Africa (39%), Asia (29%), and Europe (14%).
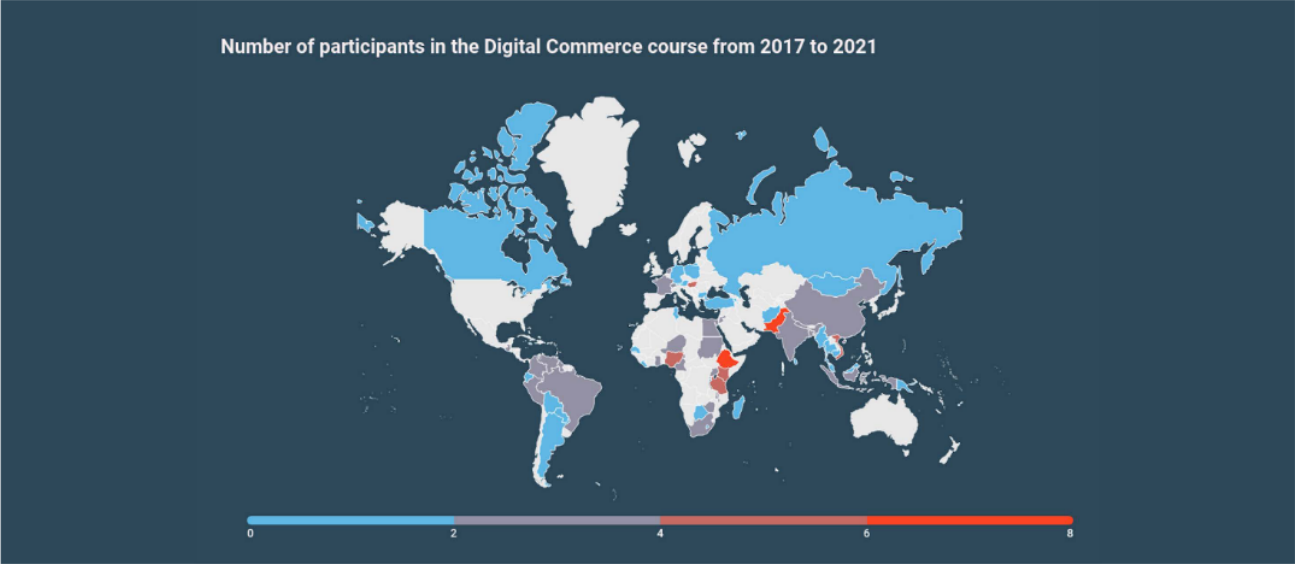


*Graphic 6. Geographical distribution of participants of the Digital Commerce course*



*Thank you for appreciating the needs of the developing and least developing countries through capacity building such as this program.*

**Dorothy Kimuli Wegoye,** *Founder and Managing Director of D&M Group International Limited, Uganda (November 2017)*

# Innovative methodology that encourages peer learning

The Digital Commerce course is based on **Diplo's interactive and collaborative online learning methodology**, designed for professionals working in an international environment.

This approach to capacity building goes beyond a typical training course in a number of ways. Since participants remain 'on-the-job' during the course, they can immediately apply their new knowledge in their daily routines. In addition, participants bring the challenges and issues they face at work to class discussions. Finally, the nature of interaction with the course faculty is quite intensive, with faculty members offering examples and guidance based on their own experiences, in an approach similar to mentoring.

*The course has given me the opportunity to share our national experience and learn from other countries that are harnessing the power of the digital revolution for their development.*

**Veronica Bogarin Closs**
*First Secretary, Delegate from Paraguay to the WTO,*
*Permanent Mission of Paraguay to the WTO, Geneva (May 2021)*

Diplo's online learning is guided by faculty members, with participants moving together through course materials following a weekly cycle. Each week of the course, participants read an assigned module text, presented in the online classroom. As they read, they add comments and questions using Diplo's hypertext tool, sharing their experiences, requesting clarifications, and pointing out useful resources. The course faculty and participants read these hypertext entries and respond, creating a discussion around the module text.

*I loved how the course was structured, and the hypertext feature.*

**Isaac Maposa,**
*Co-founder and Marketing Director, Web Enchanter P/L (December 2017)*

Due to the wide and varied experience of participants and faculty members, these online discussions are often vibrant and informative, leading to the collaborative creation of knowledge going far beyond that presented in the module texts. Participants also complete a short quiz each week designed to quickly check their understanding of key points from the module text.



The weekly cycle comes to a close with a meeting, where participants and faculty members discuss open questions from the week, with a focus on current policy discussions and negotiations. When the course was offered to Geneva-based participants, these meetings consisted of a one-hour face-to-face interaction. When the course was offered to a global audience, the meetings took place on Diplo's chat platform or on Zoom.



*I found the course reading material and the peer learning methodologies that were used extremely enriching.*

**Nadini Chami**, *Senior Research Associate*
**IT for Change** *in special consultative status with the United Nations ECOSOC (November 2017)*
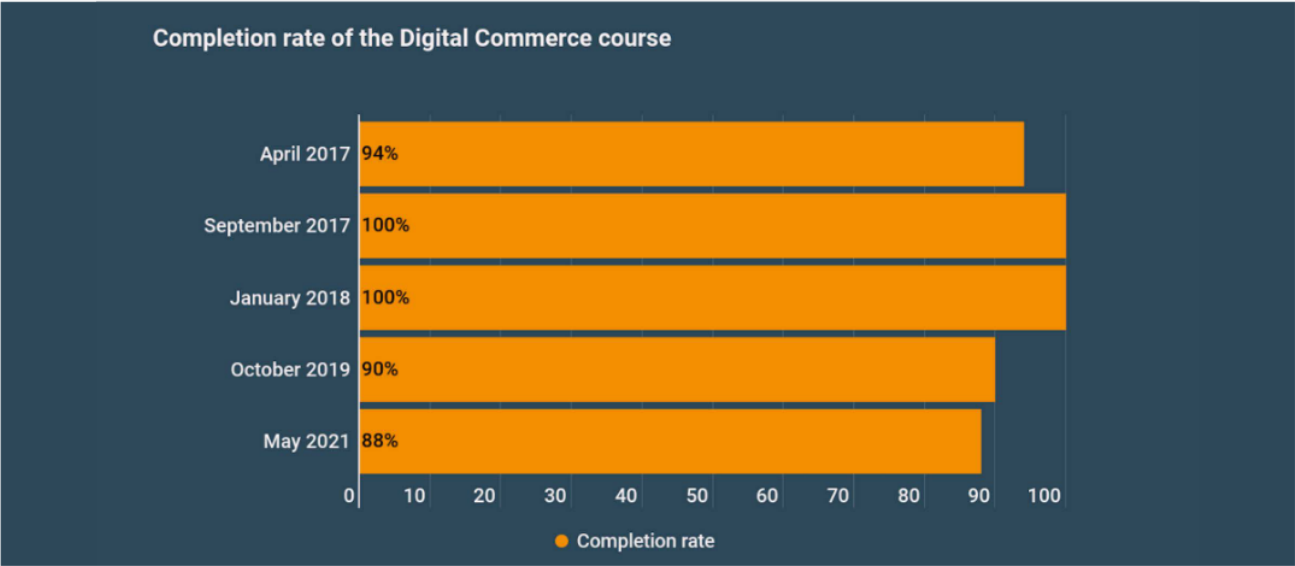
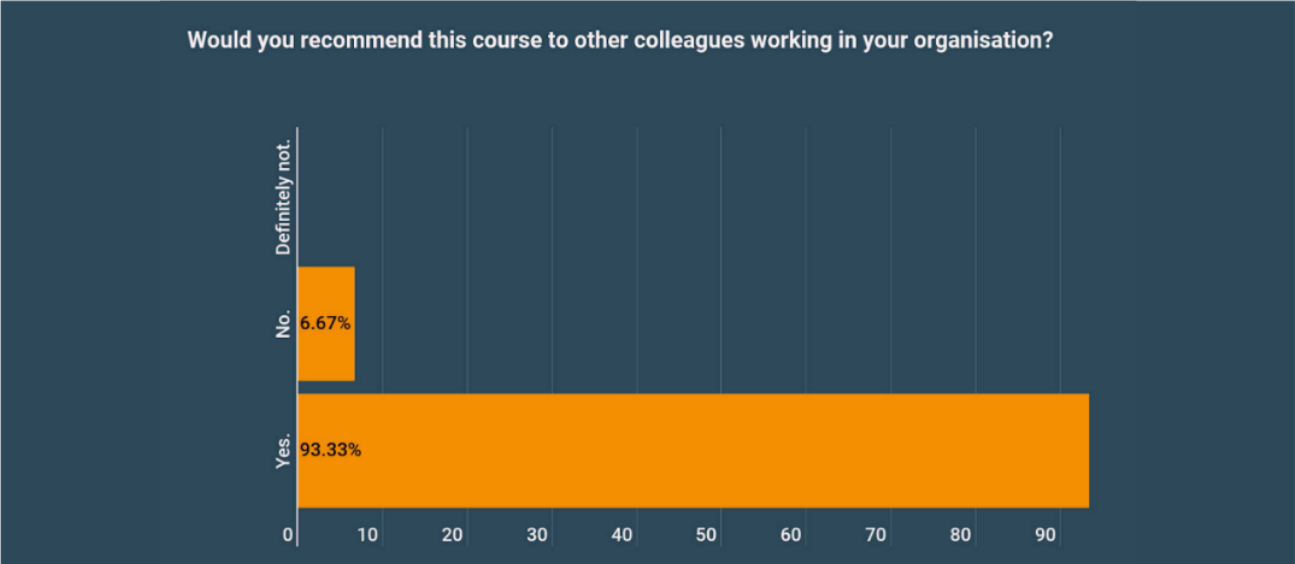*Photo 1. Digital Commerce course, weekly meeting, 2018*



*Photo 2. Digital Commerce course, zoom meeting, 2021*

This interactive methodology significantly contributes to a higher-than-average completion rate among course participants. While the completion rates for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) with some degree of interaction and group work revolve around 40%, Diplo's online courses have shown an average completion rate of 90% for several years. In the specific case of the Digital Commerce course, the average completion rate was an even higher 94%.

**Completion rate of the Digital Commerce course**

| Month | Completion rate |
|-------|-----------------|
| April 2017 | 94% |
| September 2017 | 100% |
| January 2018 | 100% |
| October 2019 | 90% |
| May 2021 | 88% |

● Completion rate

*Graphic 7. Completion rate of the Digital Commerce course*

According to the results of the tracer survey, 93% of the course alumni would recommend this course to colleagues working in their organisations.

**Would you recommend this course to other colleagues working in your organisation?**

| | |
|---|---|
| Definitely not. | |
| No. | 6.67% |
| Yes. | 93.33% |

*Graphic 8. Participants' assessment of whether they would recommend the course to other colleagues in their organisations*
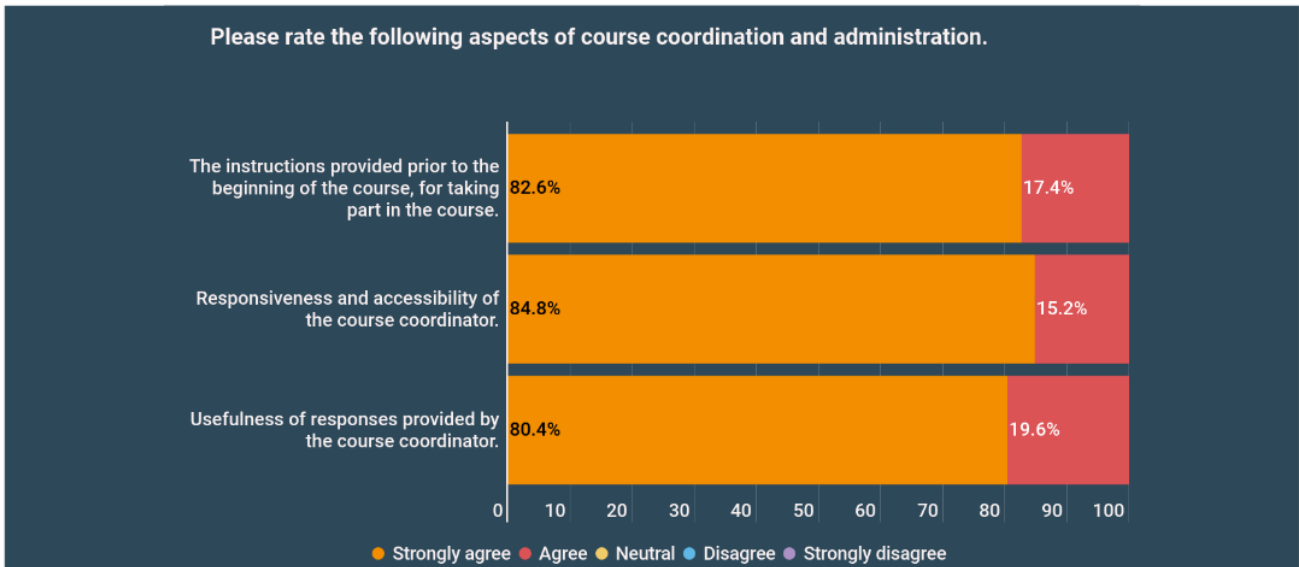
# Constant evaluation and assessment of impact

In order to ensure that the course successfully achieves its pedagogical objectives, a survey is shared with participants at the end of each iteration. The survey asks them about the quality of course materials, the adequacy of the workload, the effectiveness of interaction with the faculty and peers, the responsiveness of the course administration, and the usefulness of the weekly evaluation based on quizzes. It also inquiries them about the most salient strengths of the course and the issues to be improved. The aggregated answer (2017 to 2021) to some of these questions can be found below.
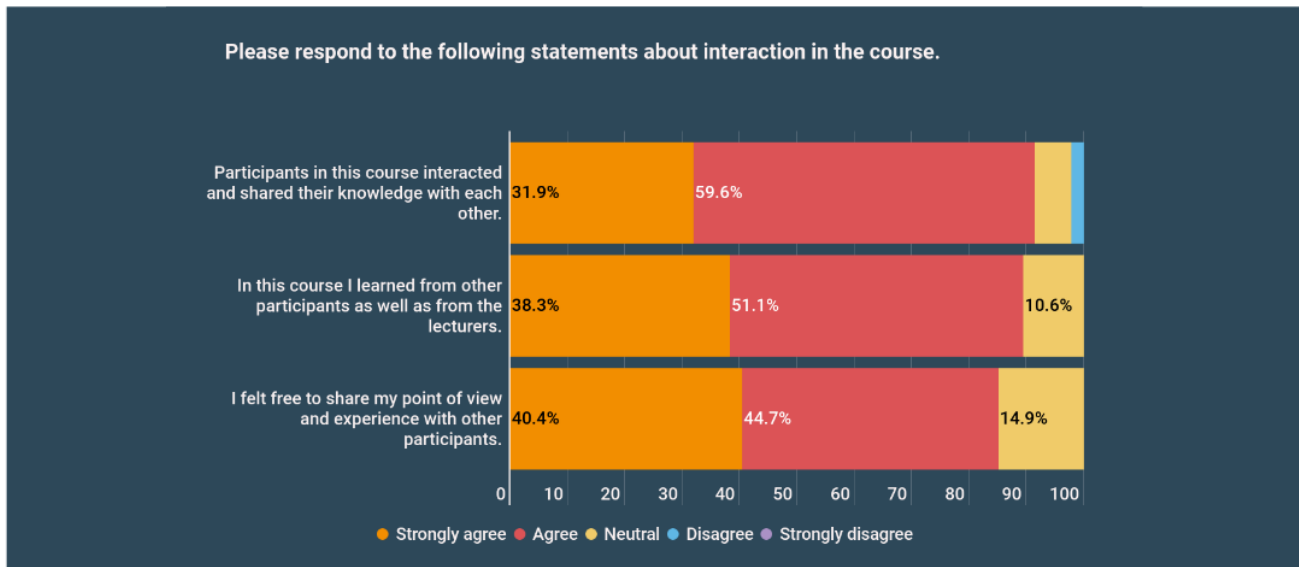


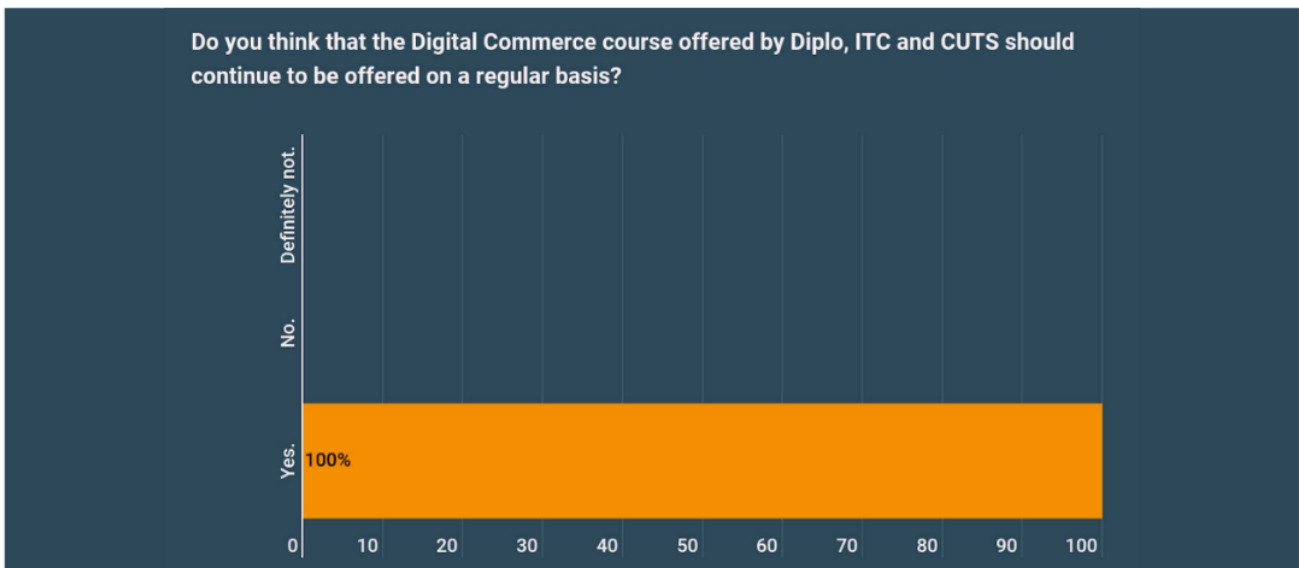*Graphic 9. Participants' assessment of interaction in the course*
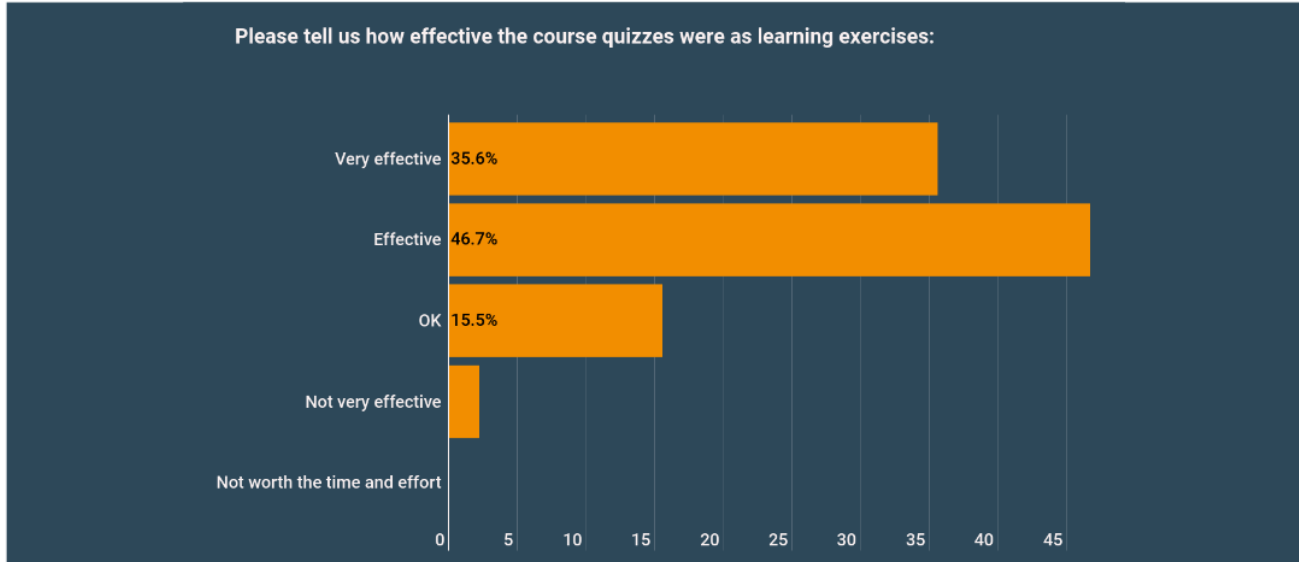


*Graphic 10. Participants' assessment of quiz exercises used to test their understanding at the end of each module*

**Please rate the following aspects of course coordination and administration.**

The instructions provided prior to the beginning of the course, for taking part in the course. — 82.6% / 17.4%

Responsiveness and accessibility of the course coordinator. — 84.8% / 15.2%

Usefulness of responses provided by the course coordinator. — 80.4% / 19.6%

● Strongly agree ● Agree ● Neutral ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree

*Graphic 11. Participants' assessment of course coordination and administration*

In 2021, a tracer study was conducted for the first time with alumni from all editions of the course (2017-2021). The main goal was to capture their impressions about the course in hindsight, and to understand how the course had impacted their knowledge on e-commerce, their ability to effectively take part in e-commerce negotiations and poli-cymaking, and the impact of the course on their careers. Although it was not possible to reach part of alumni due to changes in the host country and e-mail addresses of diplomats, ten per cent of the alumni took part in the survey. Respondents span across all five editions of the course, strengthening the representativeness of the results.

According to 100% of the alumni, it is important to continue offering this course in years to come on a regular basis.



**Do you think that the Digital Commerce course offered by Diplo, ITC and CUTS should continue to be offered on a regular basis?**

Yes. — 100%

*Graphic 12. Participants' assessment of whether the course should be offered on a regular basis*

# Digital Commerce course: a 'must' in the e-commerce capacity building landscape

The need for capacity building in e-commerce is urgent and cuts across several different areas, from infrastructure to regulatory frameworks and strengthening individuals' skillsets. The Digital Commerce course has filled a crucial gap in the e-commerce capacity building landscape by providing policy-oriented support for government officials, confronted with the task to formulate national policies or voice the position of their countries at the international level.

Initiatives to regulate e-commerce are moving forward at an accelerated pace. In this scenario, the convergence between trade and digital policies has increased. Policymakers and diplomats need a solid understanding of the technical foundations and regulatory approaches that apply to a myriad of areas, from e-signatures to data flows and source code. The Digital Commerce course provides the skills for these actors to operate with confidence by providing a mix of technical, legal, and theoretical knowledge, enriched by cases and examples.

There is still an unmet demand for capacity building in e-commerce in all regions, but most especially in developing countries and LDCs. In these countries, in particular, the Digital Commerce course could make a significant contribution to e-commerce policy development.