Out-of-School Youth Engagement Rapid Assessment

Understanding the barriers and enablers to enrollment and completion of the programs serving Philippine out-of-school youth (OSY)

The Philippines, April 2024







Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library





About the report

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Education Development Center (EDC) Philippines collaborated with Accenture Development Partnerships (ADP) under the Opportunity 2.0 (O2) program to conduct a rapid assessment to understand the barriers and enabling factors impacting out-of-school youth (OSY) enrollments in ALS and TVET programs, where estimates suggest that less than one-fourth of the OSY were enrolled in these programs as of 2020. The report also explores reasons for non-completion of programs after enrollment and identifies potential improvement initiatives.

The rapid assessment for this report was conducted from May 2023 to June 2023.

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Acronym



Description

Acronyms

ABC	Association of Barangay Captains
A&E	Accreditation and Equivalency
ALS	Alternative Learning System
APIS	Annual Poverty Indicators Survey
BARMM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
BLP	Basic Literacy Program
CHED	Commission on Higher Education
CLC	Community Learning Centers
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
CTEC	Community Training and Employment Coordinators
DALSC	District Alternative Learning System Coordinator
DepEd	Department of Education
DOLE	Department of Labor and Employment
DSWD	Department of Social Welfare and Development
DTS	Dual Training System
D2L	Desire 2 Learn
EDC	Education Development Center
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
HERO	Higher-level Education or Training Readiness Orientation
ICT	Internet Communication & Technology
IP	Indigenous People
JHS	Junior High School
KOICA	Korea International Cooperation Agency
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer
LGU	Local Government Units
LLMA	Local Labor Market Assessment
LOP	Life of Project
LYDO	Local Youth Development Offices
MOOC	Massive Open Online Courses
NCR	National Capital Region



Acronym	Description
NEET	Not in Employment, Education and Training
NYC	National Youth Commission
OES	OSY Engagement Study
OSY	Out-of-School Youth
PESO	Public Employment Service Office
POY	Pathways Orientation of the Youth
PI	Personal Interviews
PSA	Philippines Statistics Authority
PYD	Positive Youth Development
SEAMEO INNOTECH	Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Center for Educational Innovation and Technology
SETG	Study on Employment of TVET graduates
SHS	Senior High School
SILC	Savings and Internal Lending Communities
SK	Sangguniang Kabataan
SL	Secondary Level
SY	School Year
TESDA	Technical Education and Skills Development Authority
ТОР	TESDA Online Program
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
TVI	Technical Vocational Institution
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas
WRN	Work Ready Now
YDA	Youth Development Alliances
YDO	Youth Development Organization
4Ps	Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program





Executive Summary



Background and motivation

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), 1 in every 10 Filipino youth aged 6 to 24 has discontinued their education. PSA defines out-of-school children as those who are 6 to 14 years old and who are not attending formal school; and family members 15 to 24 years old as out-of-school youth (OSY) who are currently out of school, not gainfully employed, and have not finished college or post-secondary course.¹

While it is of utmost importance to prevent the discontinuation of schooling, at the same time, there are also significant opportunities to help those who are no longer in school and are categorized as being OSY. The Philippine government has been operating many programs serving OSY, notably Department of Education's (DepEd) Alternative Learning System (ALS) and Technical Education and Skills Development Authority's (TESDA) Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) courses, for the socio-economic upliftment of OSY through education and skilling. However, to date, such programs have not been able to reach a large section of the national OSY population despite diligent and dedicated multilateral efforts. As per the estimates, there are (approximately) 3.75 million OSY aged 15–24 years as of 2020, but less than one-fourth were enrolled under ALS and TVET programs.² Hence, to secure the socio-economic future of the individual OSY and the society at large, it becomes imperative to increase the enrollment of OSY in education and skilling programs.

This rapid assessment study aims to understand the barriers OSYs face in enrolling and completing ALS and the TVET programs and identify potential improvement initiatives to address these barriers or facilitate increased OSY enrollment and completion.

Study methodology

This rapid assessment study primarily employs qualitative approaches for data collection, which aligns with the objective of this study: to capture the perspectives of the OSY, their parents, teachers, and barangay leaders on the barriers faced by OSY in enrolling in and completing the ALS and TVET courses. Nineteen Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and 45 Personal Interviews (PI) were conducted with the OSY, teachers, parents, barangay leaders, and local government officials, and they were structured to encourage the participants to share their thoughts freely. The FGD and PI were held in 4 locations across the Philippines – the National Capital Region (NCR), Cagayan De Oro City, Cebu City, and Cotabato City. The participants were selected to ensure diversity, e.g., in terms of age, gender, rural-urban residence locations, and enrollment status in ALS and TVET OSY programs. We conducted the discussions in Filipino, Bisaya, and English to ensure the participation of different linguistic groups. A thematic analysis was performed on the qualitative data inputs of the FGD and PI to identify common themes and patterns related to barriers faced by OSY across the education and skilling journey and the corresponding improvement initiatives. The FGD and PI were followed by a preliminary discussion with the representatives from United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Education Development Center (EDC) staff of the Opportunity 2.0 program for OSY, and stakeholders from other organizations on some of the barriers and the corresponding improvement initiatives mentioned by the FGD and PI participants to determine actionable insights from the improvement initiatives.

The FGD and PI were further augmented with desk research and analysis of the enrollment data of ALS and TVET programs to quantify the extent of the issue of low enrollment and its trends and to support the FGD and PI inputs, subject to data availability.





Study findings

The comparison of total enrollments under the ALS and TVET programs for youth aged 15 years – 24 years against the total number of the OSY indicates that less than 50% of the OSY were enrolled in the ALS and the TVET program during any year for the period 2017-2020.² The enrollment peaked in 2019 at 1.6 Mn (approximately) but declined significantly to 0.8 Mn (approximately) in 2020, evidently due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.²

While multiple institutional efforts are ongoing to increase enrollments and course completion, the FGD and PI conducted with OSY, barangay leaders, government officials, teachers, and parents highlight critical barriers hindering enrollment and program completion across the education and skilling journey.

The education and skilling journey of the OSY can be categorized under four stages (Figure 12) – Awareness (information about the available programs), Impact value (understanding the program's impact value), Enrollment (decision to enroll in the program), and Program completion (retention and completing the program requirements, e.g., ALS A&E certification, TVET graduation). The journey's culmination is receiving an education diploma or TVET certification, which prepares for employment or entrepreneurship ventures and provides psychosocial benefits such as enhanced personal confidence, dignity, and social acceptance. The findings from the FGD and PI data analysis highlight eight key barriers to enrollment and program completion across the education and skilling journey, which are covered in the following section. It is worth noting that while there are everyday experiences of FGD and PI participants regarding both the ALS and TVET programs, there also exist apparent differences between the two programs in case of some of the barriers and recommendations. They have been highlighted in the report as applicable.

Barriers faced by OSY

»	Limited reach of in-person awareness and enrollment channels
»	Limited online information about OSY programs
»	Enrollment system's limited success in persuading OSY of program benefits
»	Financial constraints faced by OSY
»	Inconducive home environment for studying
»	Limited accessibility of OSY programs
»	Inadequate ALS physical infrastructure serving OSY
»	Academic and psychosocial challenges while pursuing the programs
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The FGD and PI data analysis indicates that there is a high regard for the in-person door-to-door house visits conducted by barangay leaders, ALS teachers and coordinators, and other volunteers for information about the OSY programs. Such visits help OSY and their family members to better understand different program options, how to avail of them, and get their queries resolved, if any. However, the FGD and PI participants highlighted that not all barangays have the capacity to conduct house visits, particularly those in small and remote areas due to a lack of labor power and other logistical constraints.

It is recommended that resources are allocated effectively to maximize house visits as an OSY mobilization strategy. The Opportunity 2.0 program is already implementing a barangay caravan campaign in its projects which could further be intensified and scaled to other areas with support from the barangay officials, Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) members, local government unit, youth development organizations (YDOs), and Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) representatives. House visit volunteers can be coached to effectively communicate awareness messages and information related to ALS and TVET programs supported with banners and posters, roadshows, query resolution desks, etc. to maximize the outcome of each visit. Other ways to ramp up in-person mobilization could include social channels such as community hall meetings, visits to juvenile detention centers, collaboration with other youth organizations, and referrals from existing OSY enrollees of ALS and TVET programs.



Limited online information about OSY programs

The FGD and PI data analysis indicates that youth have a high online engagement, especially on Facebook. Online platforms serve as the primary medium of mass engagement and generate the first level of curiosity regarding ALS and TVET programs. However, the FGD and PI participants mentioned that available Facebook posts lack details on the course curriculum, the program registration process, the benefits of the program, etc. The online medium also has the challenge of being a host for an increasing amount of false or inaccurate information and in general, the OSY participants mentioned that they do not have full confidence in the reliability of the contents of social media posts.

Online channels could continue to serve as a means of mass engagement and generate the first level of awareness of ALS and TVET programs to capture attention. The Opportunity 2.0 program can collaborate with DepEd and TESDA to strengthen current social media campaigns through the official online channels to track engagement (clicks, queries, registrations) and act as a counter to the spread of misinformation. It could also assist DepEd and TESDA in enhancing the quality, reach, and effectiveness of their respective social media channels. The 'Facebook Live' or 'Instagram Live' feature could also be explored by DepEd and TVET officials and volunteers to reach out to OSY at a scheduled time, with a specific agenda.

Enrollment system's limited success in persuading OSY of program benefits

The FGD and PI data analysis indicates that OSY and their families largely agree that the ALS and TVET programs meet the objective of imparting academic knowledge and certifications and equipping OSY with employable skills. However, there was more appreciation for the benefits of the TVET courses compared to ALS among the FGD and PI participants, as the TVET courses are perceived to be directly linked with employment. This perception is also supported by the TESDA Study on Employment of TVET Graduates (SETG) study which states that 8 out of 10 TVET graduates get hired.³ On the other hand, ALS programs were generally not seen by the FGD and PI participants to be directly and immediately addressing the issue of employment, given the benefits are realized only in the long term. The ALS program also seemingly faces a lack of societal appreciation among some stakeholders as a quality alternative pathway to basic education.

It is important to focus on aiding OSY to be informed of the positive impact of pursuing either the ALS or TVET program on their lives to persuade them to enroll in the programs given the opportunity costs involved. To achieve the same, it is imperative not only to create a substantial value proposition for the programs but also to effectively communicate the potential value proposition to OSY and those who influence their decision-making. The Opportunity 2.0 (O2) program is working on strengthening job referral opportunities for OSY program completers in its project sites and aims to further enhance and expand these efforts through collaboration with Public Employment Service Office (PESO) and the private sector. Additionally, the O2 program is focusing on reinforcing post-program employment transition pathways, utilizing innovative approaches such as work-based learning and Be Your Own Boss.

Short-term TVET courses could be rolled out for ALS graduates in partnership with TESDA, based on Youth Development Alliances' (YDA's) local labor market assessment, and could be supported by scholarships, internship opportunities, and microcertifications for work readiness skills. The Opportunity 2.0 program is working with the DepEd Bureau of Alternative Education (BAE), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Private Sector, Public Sector, and Youth Development Alliances (YDAs) to address the negative perception issues related to ALS, and the efforts can further be augmented through a re-branding campaign executed by a professional marketing firm addressing employers, higher institutions, family members of the OSY community and society at large. The ALS could also engage more OSY community members through extra-curricular and sports activities, and community-based awards.

Both the ALS and TVET courses can become more inclusive for marginalized community members e.g., Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ+) OSY, disabled OSY, etc. by improving physical accessibility and the social-emotional climate of



learning environments and introducing courses as per their interests, subject to alignment with local labor market requirements. The ALS and TVET awareness campaigns should focus on the impact value of offered programs specific to the needs of ALS and TVET, video messages capturing success stories of successful graduates, along with other administrative details e.g., schedules, learning centers, registration process, and documentation, to comprehensively communicate the value proposition of the programs.

Financial constraints faced by OSY

The FGD and PI data analysis indicates financial challenges with the overhead expenses related to education (travel, meal, study) as well as the opportunity cost for youth during their study time (employment income lost during pursuing the course) of either the ALS or TVET programs. The COVID-19 pandemic further worsened the situation impacting home budgets. Some participants mentioned that as a result, they had to defer their plans to enroll, while some others discontinued their learning, and they are still looking for an appropriate time to get back to their studies.

The presence of an institutional mechanism for OSY financial assistance, with high coverage, unanimously emerged from the FGD and the PI as the most potent initiative to improve enrollment rates. The Opportunity 2.0 program could advocate with government agencies to include more OSY under the 4Ps scheme and prioritize OSY for scholarships. It could also promote the development and pilot-testing of innovative financial support initiatives for employed OSY to counter the opportunity costs of studying which could include incentives for employers to allow OSY to have time off work to complete their studies through dual training programs, subsidies, and/or tax incentives, among others. The learning of OSY could also be prioritized through barangay-level budget interventions designed to offset travel and meal costs of OSY enrolled in ALS and TVET programs. This includes the provision of transportation services and/or travel allowances, meal allowances, or a mid-day meal scheme at the learning centers. FinTech companies could also be partnered with, to extend financial support to OSY.

Inconducive home environment for studying

The FGD and PI data analysis indicates that OSY who are parents, especially single parents or teenage parents, and primary caregivers find it difficult to manage their household responsibilities along with focusing on studies. The cases of family abuse and violence, which worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic to an extent, also pose challenges to OSY enrollment and program completion.

The Youth Development Alliances (YDAs) established by the Opportunity 2.0 project could advocate for Local Government Units (LGUs) to provide ALS and TVET OSY learners access to daycare centers as part of their program support efforts and it can serve as a model for other geographic areas. The Opportunity 2.0 program can also work through the YDAs and YDOs, to develop and pilot test a family outreach program at the barangay level integrated with youth volunteering programs and extended to orient barangays, village, tribal and religious leaders, and create safe spaces for learning with their support. It can coordinate with Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), and 4Ps, to integrate Pathways Orientation of the Youth (POY) and Work Ready Now (WRN) with the family outreach programs and include psychosocial & mental wellness interventions and resiliency modules. The Opportunity 2.0 program could partner with organizations working for the LGBTQ+ community, indigenous people, and other marginalized communities to effectively deliver outreach programs. Online learning could be prioritized in situations where it is difficult to create safe learning spaces.

Limited accessibility of OSY programs

Program accessibility can either be physical or virtual (online). The FGD and PI data analysis indicates that the distance of the learning centers deters OSY from enrollment, due to increased travel costs and time.



Further, the mandated shift to virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult for OSY with no Laptops or Smartphones and Internet to enroll and complete the programs. The local DepEd and TESDA offices could advocate with barangays for barangay vehicles to be provided to transport ALS and TVET learners to their respective learning centers. To facilitate online learning, the Opportunity 2.0 program could advocate with DepEd and TESDA to provide OSY improved access to laptops or smartphones and SIM with internet support, in partnership with the private sector.

Inadequate ALS physical infrastructure serving OSY

The FGD and PI data analysis indicates the inadequacy of the current ALS learning center infrastructure, i.e., lack of basic furniture, computers, and other teaching aids acts as an added disincentive to enroll in ALS programs. It was reported that there are cases where the classes are held in any available space, which could be public schools, community centers, gymnasiums, basketball courts, or any other temporarily available space. Some of the participants also highlighted issues with the lack of available and functional water and sanitation facilities at the learning centers.

DepEd in partnership with LGUs needs to specifically allocate a budget for ALS infrastructure upgrades to improve the quality and accessibility of ALS learning environments. The Opportunity 2.0 program could provide technical advice to DepEd BAE on preparing justification for increasing budgets related to community learning center construction and refurbishment.

Academic and psychosocial challenges while pursuing the OSY programs

The FGD and PI data analysis indicated some academic and psychosocial challenges that OSY may face while pursuing the program, that might trigger them to discontinue. The academic challenges refer to the difficulty associated with understanding the course curriculum and keeping up with the learning requirements of the syllabus. In addition to the academic challenges, OSY may also face bullying, gender discrimination, or other similar social issues, leading to adverse psychological impact, and triggering them to discontinue the program.

DepEd and TESDA are encouraged to develop and provide individual tutorship facilities and extend support to learners through peer groups. DepEd and TESDA should also improve access of OSY to counseling services to help them with mental health issues. The Opportunity 2.0 program can also collaborate with Youth Development Alliances (YDAs), and Youth Development Offices (YDOs) in its project sites, to launch a gender inclusivity campaign to encourage ALS teachers and TVET trainers and ALS and TVET learners to be sensitive toward the needs of other genders and create an inclusive environment for all genders.







Introduction



Background of the out-of-school youth (OSY) situation in the Philippines

The Philippines, a country with a population of approximately 110 million, has long considered literacy – the ability to read and write, a priority.⁴ To quote Vice President and Department of Education Secretary, Sara Z. Duterte, from International Day of Education celebrations at the Department of Education Central Office, 2023, "Education is the driving force behind a country's growth and development, and with more than 30 million young people, the largest in our country's history, we are poised to benefit from this demographic dividend".⁵ Dr. Michael Alba, a research fellow and professor at De La Salle University Manila attributed the growth of literacy rates in the Philippines to the formalization of the education system there and its success in achieving its basic objective – to prioritize literacy skills for students.⁶

However, while the Philippines has performed remarkably well and taken long strides in terms of literacy rates, it still grapples with the issue of continuity of education up to higher grades. As per the Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS) 2020, out of 39 Mn (approximately) population aged between 6 years to 24 years, over 9 Mn (approximately) were not attending school in the given year and over 90% of them belonged to the age group 15 years – 24 years.⁷ A World Bank report of 2018 states that an estimated half of Filipino students do not complete the full cycle of basic education, and 20% of students discontinue their education by sixth grade.⁸ Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated an already precarious situation by disproportionately impacting education, employment, and livelihood opportunities for a large population of socio-economically vulnerable youth. APIS, in its 2020 survey, mentions the top five reasons for youth not attending school as employment (22.2%), marriage (15%), finished schooling (and not continuing with further education) (14.6%), the prohibitive cost of education (11.9%) and COVID-19 pandemic (9.6%). The top reported reason for youth not attending school also varies with the region - employment emerges as the top reason for not attending school across 10 regions (3, 4A, 4B, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, NCR), finished schooling (8, CAR), education cost (5, BARMM), and COVID-19 (1, 2) across 2 regions each, and marriage was reported as the top reason to not attending school in only one region (12).⁷

A considerable number of individuals who discontinue their primary or secondary education often face difficulties in pursuing higher formal schooling or vocational training. Consequently, many find themselves employed in unskilled jobs that provide inadequate wages and minimal job stability. There are significant opportunities to enhance the educational and employment opportunities for those who have already discontinued their studies, and are not gainfully employed i.e., out-of-school youth (OSY).

Programs serving the OSY

Several initiatives have been taken by the Philippine government to help OSY, by promoting access to education, skilling, and entrepreneurship. The two flagship programs serving OSY are the DepEd's Alternative Learning System (ALS) focused on providing an alternative pathway for basic education (Basic Literacy Program and Accreditation and Equivalency) and TVET courses offered by TESDA and TESDA-accredited providers focused on technical and vocational skills development.

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) in the Philippines is a parallel learning system designed to cater to individuals who do not have access to or cannot avail themselves of the formal K to 12 basic education system. It addresses the gaps in access to basic education experienced by OSY and adults through two core programs: (i) the Basic Literacy Program (BLP) for adults with low/weak literacy and numeracy skills, and (ii) the Accreditation & Equivalency Program (A&E) which awards the graduates with a diploma comparable to the elementary and junior high school levels of the formal school system. The TVET courses, on the other hand, focus on vocational and technical skilling to prepare the youth to be ready for employment and entrepreneurship in specific occupational areas. TVET programs are generally open to those who are above 15 years of age, are high school or senior high school graduates (including ALS graduates) or are industry workers. TESDA had a total of 1,000+ TVET courses across 20+ industry sectors as of 2022, implemented by TESDA-owned TVET Centers and TESDA-accredited private Technical Vocational Institution (TVI).^{9,10}

The TVET sector is further augmented with the TESDA Online Program (TOP), which had 151 courses, and over 4.4 million registered users by the end of 2022.²³

Opportunity 2.0 (O2) program

A recent and significant boost to the ALS and TVET programs has been the launch of the USAID-funded Opportunity 2.0 Program (O2) managed by the Education Development Center (EDC).¹¹ The Opportunity 2.0 (O2) is collaborating with DepEd and TESDA, and local stakeholders in 15 city sites, to make the Philippine ALS and TESDA-managed technical-vocational education more accessible, relevant, and impactful for out-of-school youth.



Opportunity 2.0 is mandated with making second-chance education systems stronger for Filipino out-of-school youth, strengthening systems for out-of-school youth to be work and business-ready, and improving the environment for positive youth development in communities. The program is being implemented through 15 sites, across three hubs – NCR, Cebu, and Davao. In partnership with DepEd, TESDA, and other stakeholders, the Opportunity 2.0 program targets to reach 180,000 youth across the 15 sites, along with over 2,200 employers and institutions, and train 1,700 tech-voc trainers and teachers (Figure 2). Opportunity 2.0 also facilitates the formation of Youth Development Alliances (YDA) to encourage collaboration on youth development and local economic growth, amongst the various stakeholders.

The Opportunity 2.0 program supports the system-strengthening of both the ALS and TVET programs, along with niche programs serving OSY such as Youth Volunteering Activities, Youth Leadership Activities, and Pathways Orientation for the Youth (POY) among others.

The Opportunity 2.0 program status report as of Y4, Q3 reflects that the program realized significant gains, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, against yearly and life-of-project (LOP) targets (Figure 3).





Objective and focus of this OSY engagement rapid assessment

However, given the estimated size of the national OSY population at 3.75 million (approximately), the mobilization of OSY needs to happen in all school divisions, far beyond the 15 O2 cities, to maximize their participation in various education and skilling programs to create a significant impact on their lives and the overall number of OSY reached.² The enrollment rate analysis estimates that less than one-fourth of the OSY were covered under ALS and TVET in 2020.² Therefore, this rapid assessment was conducted to understand the OSY education and skilling journey, their aspirations, the challenges being faced by them, their awareness, perceptions, and experiences with the programs which can help them to do better in life through education and learning new skills. The key aspects which this study covered are:

- OSY population size and trends, and enrollment rate of the OSY population
- Awareness levels among the OSY about the available programs for the OSY
- Perceived value of the available programs
- Enrollment status, barriers, and factors impacting the decision-making
- · Initiatives that could potentially increase OSY enrollment in and completion of ALS and TVET programs



Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library





Research Methodology



The OSY engagement rapid assessment was undertaken from May 2023 – to June 2023. It employed a mix of primary and secondary research methods, collecting qualitative and quantitative inputs. The qualitative inputs were generated primarily through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Personal Interviews (PI), which were analyzed employing a thematic analysis approach. The FGD and PI were followed by workshops for key stakeholders, which included representatives from USAID, EDC, and other organizations. The secondary research included ALS and TVET enrollment data analysis and desk research for relevant available content, e.g., available programs, enrollment challenges, and improvement initiatives to increase enrollment.

Primary research and analysis methods

Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

A total of 19 FGD were held in 4 locations across the Philippines selected from current O2 sites – the National Capital Region (NCR), Cagayan De Oro City, Cebu City, and Cotabato City (Figure 4), to hear from the end beneficiaries of the OSY program directly – the OSY themselves and understand their level of awareness with the OSY programs, their reasons for enrolling or not enrolling in the programs, and the initiatives which could mitigate the barriers on the path to enrollment. Other stakeholders working in proximity with the OSY – teachers, parents, barangay officials, and government employees were also included in the FGD to gain an outside-in perspective on the OSY situation and their decision-making process. The FGD participants were carefully selected to ensure diversity in age, gender, and special communities' representation, such as members from the LGBTQ community and the BARMM (Figure 5). The questions for the discussions were prepared beforehand under four key categories – background and profile as an OSY, awareness and understanding of the impact value of the programs, barriers experienced with enrolling and continuing with the course, and initiatives to improve the enrollments. The discussions were conducted in three key languages – Filipino, Bisaya, and English, to ensure that participants share their thoughts in the language with which they are most comfortable.

The inputs collected from FGD were primarily qualitative in nature.





Figure 5: FGD participants



Personal Interviews (PI)

The FGD was augmented with follow-up interviews immediately after the FGD at the same venue with the select participants of the FGD, aimed at getting in-depth perspectives, which may not have surfaced due to the open forum nature of the FGD (Figure 6). The interviewees were selected from the FGD based on their level of participation and enthusiasm during the FGD, signaling their interest in the subject, richness of ideas, and openness to share. The interviewee selection mechanism considered diversity in age, gender, representation of special communities, and enrollment status.

The critical questions covered during the Personal Interviews, though, remained essentially the same as FGD-background & profile as an OSY, awareness, and value perception of the programs, barriers experienced with enrolling & continuing with the course, and ways to improve the enrollments, the focus was on building the profile of the interviewee, understanding their position, and diving deep into their inputs.

The inputs collected from the personal interviews were qualitative in nature.



*The gender identity of 2 participants is not available.



Thematic analysis

The research employed thematic analysis for qualitative data inputs of the FGD and PI. It systematically identifies and examines common patterns (themes) within textual data to uncover meaningful insights. This process involved manually reviewing the transcripts of FGD and PI, identifying recurring themes, and grouping similar ideas. It helped to capture open-ended inputs and develop an in-depth understanding of prevalent perspectives among the FGD and PI participants, which included OSY and their ecosystem of barangay leaders, teachers, and parents. However, given the qualitative nature of data, this method has some inherent subjectivity. It limits the quantification of responses, represents only the common patterns, and does not focus on the less predominant ideas.

Stakeholders workshop

A preliminary discussion was conducted with stakeholders from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Education Development Center (EDC), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Center for Educational Innovation and Technology (SEAMEO INNOTECH), and Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) to develop actionable insights corresponding to the improvement initiatives mentioned by the FGD and PI participants for barriers on the limited reach of in-person awareness and enrollment channels, enrollment system's limited success in persuading OSY of program benefits, financial constraints faced by OSY and inconducive home environment for studying.

Secondary research and analysis methods

Enrollment data analysis

The ALS enrollment data analysis was conducted on enrollment and completion data and PPA passer data received from the Bureau of Alternative Education in the Department of Education, along with the publicly available data. It provided insights on enrollment trends, age and gender distribution of ALS learners, and ALS dropout rates. The TVET enrollment analysis is conducted on the national TESDA-implemented and TESDA-accredited TVET enrollment statistics containing regional and gender distribution of enrollments, which TESDA publishes. There is no disaggregated data available for OSY enrolled in TVET programs. Further, the enrollment rate estimates are calculated by converting the reported school year statistics of ALS enrollment to a calendar year to align with the reporting pattern of TVET enrollments, e.g., SY 2016-17 to 2017 and SY 2017-18 to 2018.

Desk research

A desk research was conducted to leverage the readily available relevant literature and data. The desk research helped to understand the current landscape, set the context of this assessment, and provide data support to some extent for the inputs of FGD and PI participants. The critical resources referred for desk research are the Annual Poverty Indicators survey published by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), TESDA annual reports and press releases, DepEd enrollment statistics, Commission on Higher Education (CHED) enrollment statistics, Opportunity 2.0 yearly report 2021, and Opportunity 2.0 program brief, A Second Chance to Develop the Human Capital of Out-of-School Youth and Adults by World Bank, 2018, among others.

The inputs collected from the secondary research were primarily quantitative in nature.



Limitations and methodological recommendations

The employed research methodology was designed to serve the intended purpose of a rapid assessment designed to gain insights from FGD and PI participants about the OSY aspirations, their perceptions, challenges faced by OSY regarding ALS and TVET programs, and potential measures to enhance the enrollment and completion rates in such programs. However, the research methodology has its limitations, which are listed below.

- Data availability The study faced difficulty accessing accurate, reliable, and latest data that can be disaggregated for systematic data analysis. For instance, the OSY population size and its segregation into regions, genders, age groups, income groups, etc., is not available. The enrollment data also lack attributes such as regions, age groups, gender distribution, and other parameters. The ALS and TVET enrollment data available for this study included all the enrolled learners, not specifically OSY, as per the definition adopted for this study. Consequently, statistical estimations were used on most of the quantitative data to determine enrollment numbers for the OSY, impacting the findings' veracity and validity.
- Geographical coverage of FGD and PI Given time constraints, the FGD and PI could be conducted in only four cities (O2 sites) National Capital Region (NCR), Cagayan De Oro City, Cebu City, and Cotabato City, covering a total of only 124 participants. The inputs on enrollment barriers and improvement initiatives come from only the 124 FGD and PI participants. Hence, it cannot be considered a representation of the entire national situation of the Philippine OSY.
- Limited participation Despite best efforts to include OSY from all social categories, there is an absence of voices from traditionally excluded groups such as learners with disabilities, learners from indigenous people groups (IP), youth in conflict with the law, geographically remote learners, island-based learners, and other related categories. The non-inclusion of the abovementioned population groups adversely affects the study's comprehensiveness due to a lack of representation.
- Limited time frame This was a rapid assessment only due to the stringent time frame set by the EDC since the results were needed as inputs for O2 program planning. This restricted the reach of data collection and the depth of analysis that could be conducted.



Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library



The limitations of the research methodology could be addressed through some key systematic measures, which are listed below, to enhance further our understanding of the OSY challenges, experience, and education and skilling journey.



- » Rigorous systematic data collection DepEd BAE and TESDA are advised to collaborate to establish a central robust data collection mechanism for the OSY population and enrollments to serve as a single source of truth. The captured data must have attributes on region, gender, age groups, linguistic groups, ethnic groups, income classification, and other vital parameters to allow for disaggregation of data and analysis from various aspects.
- » Increase geographical coverage A subsequent study for similar purposes, if any, should address the selected sites' limitations by striving to include a more significant number of sites for inputs from OSY to fully reflect the OSY situation in the Philippines.
- Incorporate diverse perspective A subsequent study for similar purposes, if any, should actively incorporate the voices of the traditionally excluded social groups, e.g., learners with disabilities, learners from indigenous people groups (IP), youth in conflict with the law, geographically remote learners, island-based learners, and other similar categories, through collaboration with community organizations and/or advocacy groups to enhance access and encourage participation.
- » Follow-up survey The inputs of the FGD and PI participants are qualitative in nature. These inputs could be quantified through a follow-up large-scale questionnaire based on ideas emerging from the FGD and PI. The survey should include a more sizable number of respondents from across the nation and from diverse socio-economic groups. The respondents should be OSY as well as the ecosystem representatives who can influence their decision-making, i.e., OSY parents, teachers, barangay leaders, and members of local government units.





OSY Enrollment Landscape



The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) defines out-of-school children as those who are 6 to 14 years old and who are not attending formal school and family members 15 to 24 years old as out-of-school youth (OSY) who are currently out of school, not gainfully employed, and have not finished college or post-secondary course.1 The age group 15 to 24 years constitutes over 90% of the population not attending school. Hence, this age group must be paid special attention under any program for the socio-economic upliftment of out-of-school youth (OSY).⁷ Significant ongoing multilateral initiatives to improve the conditions of the OSY through education and skilling are covered in the following section.

Programmatic interventions for the OSY

The Philippine government has been running two flagship programs serving OSY– the Alternative Learning System (ALS) administered by DepEd and Technical-Vocational Education and Training (TVET) administered by TESDA (and implemented in partnership with TESDA-accredited private Technical Vocational Institutions (TVI)). These programs aim to uplift OSY socioeconomically through alternative basic education (served by ALS) and skilling (served by TVET). The following sub-sections look at each of the two programs regarding their salient features and enrollment trends.

Alternative Learning System (ALS)

ALS overview and features

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) in the Philippines is a parallel learning system designed to cater to individuals who do not have access to or cannot avail themselves of the formal K to 12 education system. It aims to provide educational opportunities for out-of-school youth (OSY), adults, and other marginalized groups who could not start or continue their basic elementary or secondary education in a formal school setting.

ALS currently consists of two major programs, the Basic Literacy Program (BLP) and the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Program. The Basic Literacy Program focuses on teaching illiterate individuals how to read, write, and perform basic mathematical calculations. This program lays the foundation for further learning and helps participants gain essential literacy skills. The Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Program, on the other hand, is designed for elementary and high school dropouts.

It provides an opportunity for these individuals to complete their elementary or secondary education by passing an A&E assessment and certification process comprising a written exam and/or a presentation portfolio. Successful completion of the A&E assessment and certification process grants them an accreditation equivalent to a formal school diploma. The ALS intends to support youth and adults who are 18 years old and above and have not been able to pursue basic education and out-of-school children aged 15 to 18 years who are of schooling age but are not enrolled in school due to various reasons, such as economic, cultural, or political factors. The target population for ALS is substantial, with an estimated 20 million (approximately) potential enrollees as of 2013.¹³ Among them, approximately 5 million potential learners fall within the age range of 12 to 26 years. Notably, all potential ALS learners may not necessarily fit the definition of OSY as provided by the Philippine Statistics Authority.



mage source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library



ALS employs three channels of delivery as follows¹⁴:

- **DepEd Delivered** It refers to the implementation of ALS where the program is directly carried out by DepEd ALS implementers such as the ALS teachers
- **DepEd Procured** It refers to the implementation of ALS where DepEd contracts the program to schools and service providers such as non-government organizations and other government organizations and literacy volunteers
- **DepEd partner-delivered** It refers to the implementation of ALS Programs by non-DepEd organizations such as Local Government Units (LGUs), Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), international donor agencies, church-based organizations, and individuals voluntarily using their resources

ALS classes take place in community learning centers, barangay multi-purpose halls, libraries, or even at home. Learning facilitators, who are trained ALS educators, manage and facilitate the learning process. The ALS program duration varies depending on the ALS Program (basic, lower elementary, advanced elementary, junior high school, and senior high school level). It could range from less than a year to approximately two years or more.¹⁵

The ALS offers excellent flexibility in terms of modes of learning, including face-to-face instruction, radio-based teaching, eSkwela or computer-based learning, independent learning, and remote learning. This flexibility ensures that ALS can cater to its learners' diverse needs and circumstances.

The ALS graduate can pursue different paths upon completion of the course, as mentioned below¹⁶:

- A&E elementary level passer → ALS Junior High School (JHS)/Employment/Self-employment
- A&E JHS level passer → Senior High School (SHS)/ TESDA/Employment/Self-employment
- A&E SHS level passer → College/TESDA/ Employment/Self-employment



Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library



ALS enrollment trends

The ALS enrollment trend indicates enrollment peaked in SY 2018-19 (Figure 7), right before the COVID-19 pandemic, for learners aged 15 years - 24 years.¹⁷ However, enrollment dropped by ~18% in SY 2019-20 over the peak of SY 2018-19, evidently due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, when face-to-face delivery was suspended, and the decline continued in SY 2020-21 with COVID social distancing restrictions remaining in force. In SY 2021-22, the restrictions prohibiting face-toface instruction in both formal education and ALS were lifted. Enrollments have subsequently shown signs of recovery, and in SY 2022-23, it reached ~85 % of peak enrollment of SY 2018-19.*

The gradual nature of decline and recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic allows for enrollment projections for SY 2023-24 to SY 2025-26 to be based on extrapolations of post-pandemic growth rates and are bounded by a lower estimate (-5%) and an upper estimate (+5%). The statistical projections suggest that ALS enrollments will be able to reach near the pre-pandemic enrollment level by SY 2025-26.17



Figure 7: ALS Enrollments ('000s), for learners aged 15 years – 24 years¹⁷

Several steps are being taken at an institutional level to increase enrollments. DepEd partnered with UNESCO Jakarta and KOICA to develop 50 new ALS modules addressing gaps in competency coverage of the new ALS K to 12 curriculum and improving alignment with the curriculum of the formal education system. The partnership initiative also included capacitybuilding training for girl learners and teachers to increase the enrollment of out-of-school females.^{18,19} A girls' education center has also been constructed for increased interaction between the ALS learners and the ALS teachers.¹⁸ As part of the COVID-19 pandemic response, DepEd and UNICEF introduced the ICT4ALS and ALSware initiatives to offer technological assistance and support for regular ALS programs, ensuring the continued delivery of ALS programs despite pandemic restrictions. Since the pandemic began, the ICT4ALS website has been utilized by 206,000 individuals, and an initial group of 1,707 ALS learners has benefited from ALS teaching and learning resources of the ALSware packages.²⁰ The focus on providing technical support to ALS learners, along with the efforts made by officials and volunteers to encourage out-of-school youth (OSY) to enroll, likely contributed to controlling the decline in enrollments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, even during the COVID years, the yearly enrollments did not go below 80% of peak enrollments of SY 2018-19.



Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

TVET overview and features

The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) TVET program in the Philippines is a comprehensive initiative aimed at transforming the technical education and skills development of the Filipino workforce. It offers a wide range of skilling courses such as Electrical Installation and Maintenance, Cookery, Plumbing, etc., across various industry sectors, including Agriculture, Construction, Garments, Logistics, Healthcare, Information Technology, and other industries (1000+ courses across 20+ industry sectors as of 2022).^{9,10} TVET courses are delivered by TESDA training schools, centers, TESDA-accredited private Technical Vocational Institutions (TVI), and other partners. The duration of the training varies depending on the TVET courses, ranging from a few weeks to up to three years.⁹ The TVET courses enable an individual to employment and entrepreneurship (self-employment).

The TVET program strives to support those aged 15 years or older and are high school graduates, senior high school graduates (including those who have completed the Alternative Learning System), college undergraduates or graduates, or industry workers.²¹ TESDA sets annual enrollment targets at the beginning of each year, reflecting the anticipated demand for technical education and skills training and the availability of funds. For example, the 2022 enrollment target was approximately 1.07 million individuals, and the target for 2023 is approximately 1.8 million individuals.^{10,22} TESDA does not have a specific target set for reaching OSY. Notably, not all TVET learners necessarily fit the definition of out-of-school youth (OSY) as provided by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

The TESDA-implemented and TESDA-accredited TVET courses are delivered through five distinct modalities:

- School-based programs These refer to the direct delivery of TVET programs by TESDA-administered schools. There are a total of 57 schools, which include 19 agricultural schools, 7 fishery schools, and 31 trade schools. These school-based programs offer post-secondary courses of varying durations, with a maximum duration of three years.
- Center-based programs These refer to skilling course delivery conducted in TESDA Regional (15) and Provincial (45) Training Centers. These centers focus on specific trade areas tailored to the needs of the country's different regions and provinces.
- TESDA accredited Training Institutions implemented programs Over 4,500 public and private training institutions are accredited by TESDA to implement approved courses. These Technical Vocational institutions (TVI) must comply with the minimum quality standards and training regulations for each training course set by TESDA.
- Community-based programs The Community-based Training for Enterprise Development Program primarily targets poor and marginalized groups who do not have easy access to formal training mechanisms. These individuals have limited skills, management abilities, and economic options. The program aims to facilitate the establishment of livelihood enterprises that participants can immediately implement after completing the training. It also aims to help partner agencies, such as LGUs, NGOs, people's organizations, and other organizations with a mission to help people experiencing poverty engage in productive activities for themselves and their communities.
- Enterprise-based programs Enterprise-based programs are training programs implemented within companies and firms. These programs include the Apprenticeship Program (involving a contract between an apprentice and an employer), Learnership Program (on-the-job training for a maximum period of three months, and the Dual Training System (DTS) (learning takes place in training schools and the company).

In addition to the five delivery modalities mentioned above, TESDA launched the TESDA online program (TOP) in 2012. It is a web-based platform that offers free Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for technical education and skills development. The key objectives behind launching TOP were to provide and expand access to TVET, ensure the quality of TVET provision through standardization, promote TVET as a



viable and accessible education track, and develop TESDA's e-learning capabilities. As of 31 December 2022, TOP had 151 courses and over 4 million registered users.^{23,24}

TVET enrollment trends

The TVET enrollment trend (Figure 8) indicates that the overall national enrollment peaked in 2019 at approximately 1.08 million for learners aged 15 years – 24 years.²⁵ The enrollments declined sharply by over two-thirds in 2020 over the peak of 2019, with total enrollments in 2020 being only ~32 % of 2019 enrollments, evidently due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, no breakdown of OSY enrollments in TVET courses is available.

The enrollment pattern by delivery modes reveals that a sharp decline in overall TVET enrollments has been due to an extreme reduction in enrollments in community-based and institution-based programs (both TESDA-implemented and TESDA-accredited). This decline happened as most areas were under lockdown in 2020-2021 to abide by government-imposed COVID-19 restrictions, which prohibited face-to-face classes. The community-based enrollments have shown signs of recovery with the easing of the restrictions but are yet to stabilize (Table 1). The institution-based training has also been affected due to similar lockdown restrictions, where 2020 enrollments were less than 50% of 2019 enrollments. However, over the entire period of 2017-2022, enterprise-based training has had the lowest share, i.e., only 5%. (Table 1).

The last couple of years have shown signs of recovery; however, it has been slow and unstable. The enrollments increased in 2021 over 2020 but again decreased in 2022, though only by a fraction. The overall enrollment in 2022 is still less than half of the pre-COVID peak of 2019.

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	% change in enrollments 2017-2022	% share of total
Institution	1,059,818	942,841	840,295	342,836	572,688	496,705	-53%	45%
Enterprise	73,298	87,525	97,517	26,616	84,057	94,863	29%	5%
Community	1,165,628	1,355,107	1,109,245	307,498	472,791	401,531	-66%	50%
Total*	2,298,744	2,395,473	2,047,057	676,950	1,129,536	993,099	-57%	100%

Table 1: Total TESDA TVET enrollments by delivery mode, 2017-2022²⁵

Enrollment trends have been further statistically projected for the period 2023-2025 over the TVET enrollment numbers of 2021 and built up from regional and gender levels. This statistical projection assumes that the high growth rate for 2020-2021 will stabilize to a steady state growth rate of 2014-2019 over 3 to 5 years, provided there are no structural changes in the demand or supply of the TVET courses. The projection suggests that TVET enrollments will revert to near pre-pandemic levels by 2025 (Figure 8).

TESDA has been cognizant of the low TVET program enrollment, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. A 2021 study commissioned by TESDA revealed that 48% of the Not in Employment, Education and Training (NEET) youth did not pursue TVET due to a lack of financial resources.²⁶

Given the overall low share of enterprise-based training out of total enrollments for 2017 – 2022 (Table 1), there is a significant opportunity to focus on the role of enterprise-based delivery mode to increase TVET enrollment through engagement with the private sector. According to the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, enterprise-based training is highly regarded as most relevant to industry needs, as it is based on practical learning and shows close connections with industry requirements.²⁷ The focus on enterprise-based training has also shown results, with a 29% growth over the period 2017-2022, taking enterprise-based enrollments to its peak of 94,863 for the period (Table 1).





Figure 8: TVET enrollments* ('000s), for learners aged 15 years – 24 years²⁵

A policy note by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies written in 2023 also acknowledges that while TVET enrollments have increased over the years, the growth was significantly hindered due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The policy note recommended enhancing the training providers' capabilities to enable them to adopt flexible training regimes, acknowledging the changing needs of different types of TVET learners.²⁸

The institution and community-based training can be expected to rebound with further easing of COVID-19 protocols, as revealed by enrollment growth after 2020. Summarily, the following institutional measures could be adopted to increase TVET enrollments:

- Engage the industry for more enterprise-based learning, which has the lowest share of enrollments during 2017-2022 at only 5% (Table 1)
- Reposition the TVET program as a viable option for higher education for youth (and not necessarily OSY), parents, and industry
- Focus on priority industry sectors such as agriculture, tourism, manufacturing, transportation & logistics, health, creative industries, energy, and construction

* The enrollments do not include TESDA online program enrollments

Comparative analysis of COVID-19 impact on enrollments

Comparison of ALS and TVET enrollment trends

The total ALS and TVET enrollments peaked in 2019 at 1.6 million (approximately) but nearly halved in 2020, evidently due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 9). Most of the decline is due to a decrease in TVET enrollments, which suffered a staggering ~66% drop in 2020 over the peak of 2019, and even in 2022, after some recovery, has still managed to reach only ~43% of the peak value of 2019 enrollments. Unfortunately, no disaggregated data for OSY TVET enrollments is available to determine if OSY enrollments follow the national TVET enrollment trend or vary significantly.

On the other hand, ALS enrollment declined by only ~18% due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 compared to the peak ALS enrollment of 2019 (Figure 9). The resilience shown by ALS enrollments could be due to the inherently flexible nature of ALS program delivery compared to TVET programs that rely on face-to-face instruction. The ALS program is flexible with dassroom location and schedules. It has promoted independent learning as well as remote learning with a modular approach. ALS teachers and facilitators also reach out directly to the ALS learners at a barangay and house level for enrollment. This mechanism enabled ALS to quickly adapt to a remote learning model put forward by the government to abide by the COVID-19 protocols.

On the other hand, TVET skill trainers have no direct role in learner mobilization. Further, TVET programs are delivered physically in designated centers, where institute-based and community-based training constitutes most of the TVET enrollments.²⁵ An analysis of TESDA budgets over the years reveals that there was no budget reduction, and it eliminates the possibility of reduced financial resources as a factor for the drop in enrollment numbers. The TVET training had to adjust to COVID-19 protocols, which forced the TVET training centers to run at reduced capacity. The observation is further supported by an increase in TESDA online program (TOP) registrations during the same period. The TOP was launched in 2012 and has over 4.4 million (approximately) users as of December 31, 2022.²³ Since the governmentimposed travel restrictions due to COVID-19 on March 16, 2020, there are 2,006,923 Filipinos who registered in the TOP, up to October 2021, which is over half of the accumulated registrants since 2012.24 It indicates that during the COVID-19 lockdown period, online learning (TOP) increased but not at a sufficient level to prevent the massive overall national drop in TVET enrollments. As the COVID-19 situation further eases, enrollments in face-toface TVET programs are expected to revert to prepandemic levels.



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Comparison of ALS and TVET enrollment trends by gender

The ALS enrollments have had a higher share of males for SY 2016-17 – SY 2022-23. However, the trend indicates increasing participation of females in total ALS enrollments, with the male-to-female enrollment ratio changing from 60:40 in SY 2018-19 to 56:44 in SY 2022-23 (Figure 10). This could be an outcome of dedicated initiatives by DepEd to increase enrollments of out-ofschool females or increases in the percentage of OSY who are female due to rising numbers of teenage pregnancies and early marriages. Further, there appears to be no adverse impact of COVID-19 on the gender distribution of ALS enrollments.

Figure 10: Total ALS Enrollments ('000s), by gender for learners aged 15 years – 24 years, SY 2016-17 – SY 2022-23¹⁷







TVET enrollments have always had a higher share of female enrollees, contrasting with ALS enrollments (Figure 10 and Figure 11). The gender distribution of the TVET enrollments, though slightly impacted during COVID-19 with up to a three percentage points decrease in female enrollees, has quickly reverted to the near pre-pandemic levels (Figure 11).



Enrollment rate

To put the combined impact of ALS and TVET programs in perspective, the total enrollments under ALS and TVET are compared against the total OSY population to determine the enrollment rate. The enrollment rate is defined as a percentage of total enrollments for ages 15 years – 24 years under ALS and TVET skilling programs over the estimated OSY population for ages 15 years – 24 years.

While enrollment data is available for ALS and TVET programs, official data on OSY population size is lacking. As a result, the calculation relies on estimating the total OSY population size. The estimated OSY population, as per the PSA definition of OSY in the age group of 15 years – 24 years, stands at approximately 3.75 million as of 2020. The same estimation has been used to analyze the enrollment rate of the OSY under ALS and TVET programs.²

The enrollment rate analysis indicates that the two flagship programs serving OSY, ALS and TVET, have, unfortunately, been unable to reach most of the out-of-school youth. In 2020, ALS and TVET, taken together, covered less than one-fourth of the total OSY aged 15 years – 24 years, assuming all ALS and TVET enrollees aged 15 years – 24 years are OSY.² The enrollment rate peaked in 2019 at ~47% between 2017 to 2020 under consideration. However, it nosedived during 2020 to ~21%, which can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic.² The TVET program enrollment rate was affected more, where the TVET enrollment rate dropped from a peak of ~31% in 2019 to ~9% in 2020. The enrollment rate trend after 2020 could not be calculated due to limitations in estimating the OSY population size after 2020.

The enrollment rate analysis indicates that ALS and TVET enrollments remain low compared to the size of the OSY population, which further deteriorated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is considerable scope to increase enrollment, calling for a concerted social mobilization effort. The following chapters focus on exploring the barriers faced by OSY, causing low enrollments, and potential improvement initiatives.



Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library





Enrollment Barriers and Improvement Initiatives



OSY education and skilling journey

The rapid assessment for OSY engagement study (OES) adopted a four-stage journey framework where an OSY's typical education and skilling journey, with either the ALS or the TVET program, could be categorized across four stages – Awareness of the programs, Impact value understanding by the OSY, Enrollment in the programs, and the Program completion, all of which culminate in realizing the expected program returns in terms of education diploma or TVET certification, employment or entrepreneurship ventures, along with other psychosocial benefits such as enhanced personal confidence, dignity, and social acceptance.



- » Awareness To begin with, the OSY needs to be aware of all the available program options for them. They need to have a complete picture of what all these programs offer, the registration or enrollment process for the program, and how to reach out for any further details to develop the first level of interest among OSY. The awareness channels could be in-person (offline) as well as online..
- » Impact Value The OSY needs to be completely convinced of the value proposition of the programs on offer. They must understand and agree on how a course can help them acquire education and skills to do better financially, psychologically, and socially.
- » Enrollment Once the OSY is aware of the available programs and entirely convinced of their value proposition, they are significantly more likely to enroll in the course. However, some internal (e.g., added financial burden, opportunity cost, family issues) and external factors (e.g., learning center distance, infrastructure, peer group) could still stop an OSY from enrollment.
- Program Completion The OSY must complete the course to realize the program's benefits. However, there could be several challenges related to the retention of OSY in the programs, either previous ones from the enrollment stage that could resurface or situations and experiences that could appear post-enrollment. It could force OSY to discontinue the program.

It is critical to involve the end beneficiaries – the OSY themselves and their immediate ecosystem stakeholders – parents, teachers, and barangay officials and government employees, in any process to determine the barriers faced by them during the education and skilling journey and the improvement initiatives aimed at increasing the enrollment rates, to ensure the success of the initiatives. With this principle of co-creation, the FGD and the PI participants were encouraged to share their open ideas on barriers faced by the OSY across the education and skilling journey and the potential initiatives that could mitigate the barriers. While FGD and PI participants have broadly mentioned overlapping experiences regarding the ALS and TVET programs, distinct differences exist between the two programs regarding specific barriers and recommendations. These variations have been highlighted in the report where applicable. For instance, the barrier 'Enrollment system's limited success in persuading OSY of program benefits' has different degrees of difficulties for ALS and TVET. In contrast, the barrier 'Inadequate ALS physical infrastructure serving OSY' applies only to ALS. All the other barriers were mentioned as a common finding for ALS and TVET (Figure 12).

The inputs from the FGD and the PI participants, largely qualitative in nature, were analyzed through thematic analysis. The initial set of potential improvement initiatives mentioned during the FGD and the PI were further discussed with the stakeholders from the USAID, EDC, CRS, SEAMEO INNOTECH, and VSO to develop actionable insights corresponding to the improvement initiatives mentioned by the FGD and PI participants on barriers related to limited reach of in-person awareness and enrollment channels, enrollment system's limited success in persuading OSY of program benefits, financial constraints faced by OSY and inconducive home environment for studying.



Figure 12: OSY education and skilling journey stages and barriers at each stage²⁹



Barriers with some distinction between ALS and TVET

Limited reach of in-person awareness and enrollment channels

Barriers to awareness

The OSY who participated in the FGD had a very high degree of awareness about ALS and TVET programs. Almost all the OSY participants in the FGD and PI confirmed they were aware of both ALS and TVET (Figure 13). However, the awareness is limited regarding the details of available courses, registration processes, benefits of attending the courses, mode of study, and other information. In terms of awareness channels, the OSY and their family members highly value the in-person door-to-door house visits conducted by the barangay leaders, ALS teachers and coordinators, and other volunteers for information about ALS, TVET, or other programs meant for the socio-economic upliftment of OSY (Figure 14).

The OSY participants shared that they prefer that the program details be explained to them in person as a step-by-step process to help them understand all the nuances of the program. Furthermore, the parents and family members are critical support pillars of OSY education and skilling journey. However, they may not be as tech-savvy as the youth. The in-person medium plays a very instrumental role in making the families understand the value of enrollment in the programs. On the other hand, the barangay leaders, government officials, teachers, and parents who participated in the FGD and PI generally noted that OSY has the necessary information required to decide on program enrollment. However, the OSY must also be convinced that enrolling is the right thing to do. The in-person medium is also extremely helpful for OSY in getting further details on the program content, enrollment process, learning mode, available avenues of support, benefits of pursuing the programs, and query resolution, if any.

However, the in-person channels have their own set of challenges. The OSY participants highlighted that from their experience, only the significant barangays seemed to have the privilege of house visits. They speculated that there is less focus on house visits for awareness campaigns in the barangays in small and remote areas, possibly due to geographical isolation and access barriers.

There are significant constraints in terms of labor power and other logistics resources to conduct regular door-to-door house visits for OSY program awareness and mobilization. The Philippines has over 42,046 barangays and an estimated 3.75 million OSY, which, from a purely statistical perspective, gives a barangay to OSY ratio of approximately 1:90 at a national average level.^{2,30} Should this statistical projection match the reality on the ground, such a high ratio would mean it is difficult to maintain an individual house-level connection with the OSY. However, it is essential to note that barangays' geographic size and population density vary significantly across regions. Some barangays may have a population of a few hundred. In contrast, the population of other barangays could go up to tens or hundreds of thousands. ALS teachers and coordinators also have a role in ALS learners' mobilization; however, ALS has only 5,412 teachers and district ALS coordinators under the DepEd-delivered ALS delivery mechanism.³¹ ALS also relies on an additional 3,844 volunteers and over 70 partner organizations.³¹ Taken together, these available ALS implementers may be insufficient in number to serve an estimated 3.75 million OSY.² In the case of TVET programs, the skill trainers have no direct role in learner mobilization.

Recommended initiatives

There was a consensus among the OSY, barangay leaders, government officials, teachers, and parents who participated in the FGD and PI that increasing the reach of in-person awareness campaigns can effectively increase enrollments. The available human and financial resources must be allocated effectively to maximize house visits. The awareness campaigns can also be supported with activities that could be tracked, such as roadshows, dedicated query resolution desks, and banners and posters in the barangays. Other social channels, such as community hall meetings, visits to juvenile detention centers, and collaboration with other youth organizations, could also be leveraged to increase the reach of the in-person medium. The Opportunity 2.0 program is already running its caravan campaign, which could further be intensified and replicated by DepEd and TESDA in terms of reach and messaging to propel prospective enrollments. The barangay officials, Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) members, Youth Development Organizations (YDOs), Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) representatives, and other volunteers could be deployed as house visit volunteers to complement the work of the ALS teachers and fill the void of barangay-level mobilization for the TVET programs.

The programs could leverage the existing network of the enrolled ALS and TVET OSY to motivate their peers to enroll through the 'Invite a Friend' initiative. A similar initiative has been recently launched for the O2 HERO (Higher Education Readiness Orientation) pilot program. House visit volunteers can be coached and enabled with campaign material and ways to effectively communicate the awareness message to maximize the outcomes of each visit. The impact of caravan and house visit campaigns should be closely monitored, evaluated, and adjusted per the on-ground requirements. As part of its innovation and learning agenda, the Opportunity 2.0 program can coordinate with Local Youth Development Offices (LYDOs) and the National Youth Commission (NYC) to draw barangay and SK planning focus on stepping up the house visits. Lessons learned from the O2 pilot experience can then be shared with DepEd, TESDA, YDAs, YDOs, and other stakeholders for possible scale-up or replication across geographic areas.

Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library

Limited online information about OSY programs

Barriers to awareness

The thematic analysis of FGD and PI data indicated that the youth have a high online engagement. OSY who participated in the FGD and PI, indicated that they understood the importance of online channels in reaching them for program awareness (Figure 15). Among the online media options, Facebook emerges as the leader. The OSY participants highlighted that Facebook serves as the primary medium of mass engagement, providing the first level of information about the programs and generating curiosity. However, Facebook or any other online media are not without limitations. The participants mentioned that while Facebook is an effective medium to reach most of the youth population, to date, it has not been seen as a reliable source of accurate and detailed information about ALS and TVET programs. The Facebook posts often contain limited information, and it may not be possible to get any further details, e.g., course curriculum, registration process, benefits of the program, etc.

The online medium also has the challenge of being a host for an increasing amount of false or inaccurate information. The FGD and PI participants shared that they do not have complete confidence in the reliability of the contents of social media posts.

The observations made by the FGD and PI participants are similar to the experiences of Filipino society at large. The Digital 2023 report states that the Philippines ranks number 4 worldwide regarding time spent on social media. Filipinos spend over 3 hours on average, significantly higher than the global average of 2.5 hours. 72 % of Filipinos use Facebook as their primary news source, followed by YouTube, which 55% of Filipinos use as a news source.³² A Pulse Asia survey found that most Filipino adults (90%) have read, heard, and (or) watched fake political news.³⁴ Of the 90% of those who have consumed false information about politics and the government, 68% mentioned that they came across it on the internet or social media.³⁴

Barriers to awareness

The online channels could continue to serve as a means of mass engagement and generate the first level of awareness to capture attention. The FGD and PI participants agreed that using Facebook posts could increase awareness. The comments section of the social media posts also proves to be helpful as peers answer many queries. The Opportunity 2.0 program could collaborate with DepEd and TESDA to enhance existing social media campaigns through the official online channels to track engagement (clicks, queries, registrations) as a counter to the spread of misinformation and assist DepEd and TESDA to strengthen the quality, reach and effectiveness of their respective social media channels. DepEd and TVET officials and volunteers could also explore the 'Facebook Live' or 'Instagram Live' feature to reach out to OSY at a scheduled time with a specific agenda.

Figure 15: OSY participants preferring online awareness channels²⁹

Enrollment system's limited success in persuading OSY of program benefits

Barriers to understanding program impact value

The FGD and PI participants largely agreed that the programs serving OSY meet the objective of imparting academic knowledge & certifications and equipping OSY with employable skills. The FGD and PI participants perceived the programs as a second chance at improving their quality of life – academically, financially, and socially. These impressions and level of understanding of the OSY program's impact value reverberate among teachers, parents, barangay officials, and government employees as well.

However, there was a clear difference in acceptance of the program outcomes of the two major programs serving OSY – ALS and TVET, among the OSY participants. The OSY participants resonated far more with the immediate employability value that TVET programs can deliver than the educational value of the ALS programs. OSY participants shared that, based on their observations, TVET programs have directly addressed the most significant challenge faced by out-of-school youth, i.e., the need for employment. The belief is supported by preliminary results of the 2022 Study on Employment of TVET graduates (SETG), which puts the employment rate of TVET graduates over 84%.³

On the other hand, the ALS program impact value had a mixed perception among the OSY participants. The participants mentioned that ALS helped the OSY learn life skills, and it served as a second chance for those who stopped their formal education to complete it. It helped those who discontinued their education during COVID-19 to return to education. Some OSY also mentioned they found the ALS environment more conducive to pursuing their educational journey. However, ALS is not perceived to be equally rewarding as the TVET programs in terms of immediate employability. ALS is considered a stepping-stone for higher education, where the expected returns materialize only in the long term. OSY participants believed employers may not value an ALS graduate equivalent to a K to 12 graduate. The participants also opined that ALS seems to lack societal appreciation from some sections of society regarding its quality, credibility, and relevance compared to formal school. OSY shared that they had heard experiences where parents advised the OSY to quit ALS and start working instead.

A World Bank report from 2016 mentioned that chances of employment and monthly income increase with the level of achievement in the ALS programs, particularly from being a non-learner to an A&E SL passer. However, even among the A&E SL passers, 50% of them reported that they had not worked.13 Conversely, TVET graduates' overall unemployment rates declined from 60%-70% before training to 28%-35% post-training.35 The OSY participants also highlighted their aspiration for global jobs. They said they expect more support from ALS and TVET programs toward attaining this goal. In some cases, the interest of the OSY may not align with the offered courses. For instance, two LGBTQ+ members highlighted that the TVET courses, e.g., electrical installation and maintenance and plumbing, do not serve their needs, and they would appreciate courses on cosmetology, hairdressing, etc.

Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library

While the program returns are to be realized upon completing the program, they play a cyclical effect on the program enrollment as better program outcomes could establish them in every household as genuinely transformative for the OSY. Despite the challenges, a compelling case of trust in the program returns could even witness increased efforts from the OSY to enroll and complete the course. Conversely, a trend of low and delayed employment outcomes may make it more difficult to convince potential learners to enroll in the programs in the first place.

Recommended initiatives

Once the OSY are aware of the available programs, they must be convinced of the positive impact that pursuing either the ALS or TVET program could bring to their lives; otherwise, the OSY cannot be expected to dedicate their time and effort towards the programs, because they are constantly juggling between looking for avenues of immediate income and other family responsibilities. To achieve the desired level of acceptance for program outcomes among the OSY, it is imperative to create substantial outcomes and adequately communicate the program outcomes to the OSY.

In terms of enhancing the perceived employability of ALS programs, it is necessary to strengthen the post-program job referral mechanisms for ALS completers, such as those offered by the Public Employment Service Office (PESO). Partnerships with the private sector can be established to support the same further. Documenting the success stories of the employed ALS graduates would also be helpful. The Opportunity 2.0 program seeks to strengthen post-program employment transition pathways through innovations like work-based learning and Be Your Own Boss. DepEd could scale up these successfully piloted innovations to non-O2 areas.

According to a World Bank study, expanding opportunities to obtain context-specific skills training and certifications during or after ALS learning sessions could increase the probability that participating in the ALS will yield higher wages in the future.⁸ Hence, the collaboration between DepEd and TESDA could be strengthened to provide internships to ALS learners during the learning period and scholarships for ALS graduates to continue their learning journey through specific TVET courses.

Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library

The Youth Development Alliances (YDAs) successfully piloted by the Opportunity 2.0 program are an excellent example of the power of interagency collaboration to facilitate post-program support for ALS completers. Short TVET courses for specific employable skills could be rolled out for ALS completers based on the local labor market priorities identified through the YDA's regional labor market assessment, e.g., short courses for baggers in a grocery store. These short courses could be implemented in partnership with the TESDA Community Training and Employment Coordinators (CTEC). ALS's recently developed micro-certification systems can also be expanded to include more work readiness skills in addition to the current two life skills under it – communication and teamwork.

The lack of societal appreciation of the value of ALS as a basic education program by some community stakeholders also needs to be systematically addressed. As a flagship inclusive education program of the DepEd, the ALS should be recognized as a comparable, credible, quality alternative learning pathway to formal schooling. The Opportunity 2.0 team could provide technical assistance to DepEd for a rebranding campaign for ALS supported by a social marketing campaign executed through a specialized professional marketing firm. The rebranding campaign should address employers, higher institutions, and society to generate appreciation and respect for the program through video messaging and other modes. The Opportunity 2.0 program also works with higher education institutions (HEIs), the private sector, the public sector, and youth development alliances (YDAs) to address the perception issue related to ALS. A community-based participatory and exciting award system (e.g., best ALS teacher) could also be instituted to raise the positive profile of ALS programs further. The ALS curriculum could also be reviewed and adjusted to become more engaging for the learners by introducing extra-curricular and sports activities. The rebranding campaign could include videos to promote a positive image of ALS.

The ALS and TVET programs also need to focus on becoming more inclusive for marginalized members of the community, e.g., LGBTQ+, indigenous people, and disabled learners, which could be achieved through launching courses specific to their needs, e.g., cosmetology, hairdressing for the LGBTQ members, subject to the needs of the labor market. A detailed roadmap aligned with the scope of Opportunity 2.0 needs to be developed to make the ALS and TVET programs more inclusive.

The value created for ALS and TVET learners should be appropriately communicated to the potential target population to realize the value-creation effort's benefits ultimately. The ALS and TVET programs have different awareness needs, given the differences in the target population, value proposition, courses, delivery model, etc. Hence, their awareness campaign should be disaggregated. The awareness campaign should focus on the impact value of available courses, enrollment, class schedules, learning centers, registration process, and documentation, along with a contact of a local volunteer who could be reached out for further queries, if any. The awareness campaigns should also reach out to the family members of the OSY as they are critical stakeholders in the education and skilling journey.

Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library

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Financial constraints faced by OSY

Barriers to enrollment and program completion

Most of the FGD and PI participants mentioned that the financial aspects associated with pursuing the programs are the biggest constraint to enrollment – the opportunity cost and the overhead expenditure incurred to pursue the course. Economic constraints can both prevent the OSY from enrolling as well as cause them to discontinue the program even after enrolling, thus impacting both the 'enrollment' and 'program completion' stages of the program education and skilling journey.

For the context of OSY, the opportunity cost refers to the income lost that could have been earned through employment during the time spent studying or skilling. Considering that the need for employment is the most significant factor behind youth not attending school, the opportunity cost of enrolling in the OSY program has a multiplier effect. It acts as the most significant deterrent against OSY enrollment and course completion, as the OSY cannot afford to lose the income needed to meet their immediate financial needs. Enrollment in ALS or TVET programs means less time available for paid employment. There were scenarios shared by the FGD and PI participants where, though the employers support OSYs by allowing them to pursue the programs serving them, the OSYs find it challenging to manage both employment and program commitment simultaneously.

Furthermore, the learners must bear the indirect overhead expenses to pursue the programs, such as transportation to the learning centers, meals, study supplies, and other costs. Some of the OSY mentioned that they wait to reach home to eat, as they don't have the budget for meals. Some participants highlighted that ALS teachers often use their own personal money to provide transportation support and even meals to the learners. While financial constraints have always been a challenge, the COVID-19 pandemic further aggravated the situation, not just for the OSY but for the Filipino society at large. 85% of households expressed experiencing financial difficulty, 73% reported job losses or a reduced workload, and close to 50% mentioned a decrease in expenditure during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁶ The percentage of adults with savings fell to 37% in 2021 from 53% in 2019, potentially partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as it may have reduced household income or increased medical expenses.³⁷

Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library

The number of savers decreased by 9.7 million, from 38.6 million in 2019 to 28.9 million in 2021.³⁷ The poverty rate deteriorated to 18.8 % in 2021, from 16.7 % in 2018.³⁸ More Filipinos had borrowings in 2021 than in 2019, as the share of adults with outstanding loans jumped to 45% from 33% in 2019.³⁷ Borrowing from family and friends, and informal lenders both slightly grew in 2021 at 47% and 14%, respectively.³⁷ The loans were primarily used to meet daily expenses. Borrowers, on average, had two outstanding loans in 2021, an increase from 2019. Borrowing emerged as the top coping strategy for emergencies and other financial needs.

The pandemic had an adverse impact on home budgets, and immediate earnings became a priority over learning and skilling. Some of the OSY mentioned that they had to defer their plans to enroll or discontinue the program if they had already enrolled, and they are still looking for an appropriate time to get back to learning and skilling. The enrollment statistics also validate the inability of OSY to return to the programs – both ALS and TVET course enrollments have not yet reached the pre-pandemic levels (Figures 7 and 8).

Recommended initiatives

The need for financial assistance appeared as a unanimous recommendation from the OSY and other FGD and PI participants and the most critical initiative to improve enrollment in ALS and TVET programs. An institutional mechanism for financial assistance to the OSY, which could either be easy access to scholarships, study supplies, or transportation and meal allowances, is required to ease the financial burden on OSY learners.

Some avenues of help are currently available for the OSY in some regions and barangays. The local government in Valenzuela City provides school kits to all learners at the start of the school year. Similarly, some of the barangays in Quezon City provide uniforms, school kits, and even meals in some cases to the ALS learners. Legazpi City provides direct cash assistance to the OSY. The Pampanga provincial government has provided over USD 170,000 (approximately) in assistance to ALS learners during the period 2019-22.³⁹ However, the currently available financial assistance programs are often reported to be limited in terms of coverage and eligibility, are scattered at a local level and the OSY are frequently not aware of them. Less than 5% (32,566) of the 1 million+TVET enrollees in 2022 were covered under six types of scholarships available for TVET graduates.¹⁰

The Opportunity 2.0 program could work with TESDA and the YDAs to advocate for enhancing the number of OSY supported under the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) and prioritize OSY for providing TVET and higher education scholarships. The financial aid in terms of scholarships could be made milestone-linked by releasing the funds in tranches at due stages as the OSY progresses through the program. The Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILC) program successfully pioneered by CRS could be scaled up for sustainability and participation of youth for their transportation, meals, allowances, cellphone loads, etc. Transportation and meal allowances could also be provided via the issuance of a travel student pass and a mid-day meal scheme at the learning centers, respectively. More community-based TVET learning centers could be set up to minimize the need for travel, which would lead to lower transportation costs and reduce time spent. The Opportunity 2.0 program could advocate with YDAs and SKs to prioritize including learning and skilling OSY during barangay-level budget planning. This budget planning includes support for ALS and TESDA in terms of transportation, meals, facilities, and scholarships. FinTech companies such as InvestEd, Home Credit, Tala, Go Tyme, Gcash loans, etc. could be engaged to extend financial support to the OSY through loans with low-interest rates and flexible payment terms to families of OSY to help them with their needs while the youth of the family is attending the programs serving OSY.

Opportunity 2.0 could also promote developing and pilot-testing innovative financial support initiatives for employed OSY to counter the opportunity costs of studying. These initiatives could include incentives for employers to allow OSY to have time off work to complete their studies through dual training programs, subsidies, and/or tax incentives, among others.

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Barriers to enrollment and program completion

Family plays a crucial role in the education and skilling journey by motivating the OSY to enroll in the programs and providing them with a conducive learning and skilling environment. A challenging home environment can discourage or prevent OSY from enrolling. It can also contribute to their decision to discontinue the course if they are already enrolled.

A problematic home situation can take multiple forms. Enrolling in the OSY program leaves less time for other responsibilities on the part of the OSY, such as being a primary caregiver or performing household chores. The FGD and PI thematic data analysis indicates that the situation is particularly challenging for single or teenage parents and female OSY. The PSA Annual Poverty Indicators Survey 2019 showed that school dropouts reached more than 2.97 million, 61.9 percent of whom are girls aged 16 to 24 who are forced into "marriage or family matters".⁴⁰ Some of the learners must bring their kids to the learning centers, due to lack of support in raising the child, which in turn negatively affects their focus on the study. The daycare centers are often non-functional or are located far away from the learning centers. Although there were 51,797 child-care centers in the Philippines as of 2011, the child-care services only reached about 20% of the target population.⁴¹ The OSY participants mentioned that some have older and ailing family members to care for or must help their parents raise their younger siblings.

The cases of family violence or abuse also make it difficult for the OSY to prioritize learning. The OSY from Cotabato City reported suffering from a clan dispute, 'Rido' which affects OSY enrollment due to security and safety concerns. The OSY participants shared that they could not go outside within their community, and some opted to relocate to rural areas. The COVID-19 pandemic also increased the cases of domestic violence - 1 in 4 Filipino women facing domestic abuse in 2017, which increased due to COVID-19 where 8 women were either maltreated or raped per day from 17-Mar to 23-May in 2020.⁴²

The challenges with family situations become even more prominent when programs are delivered via remote learning, where the OSY spends more time at home. A survey conducted by the global software firm Desire 2 Learn (D2L) reported that balancing learning with other responsibilities is a key concern with remote learning for 47% of the students.⁴³

Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library

Recommended initiatives

OSYs need to be supported with their family responsibilities and provided a nurturing family environment to enable them to focus on learning and skilling.

Learners with young children and learners who are single parents, including teenage mothers, should be provided access to daycare facilities near their learning centers, which could include collaboration with daycare service providers. The YDAs could advocate for LGUs to provide ALS and TVET learners access to daycare centers as part of their program support efforts. The schedule and duration of classes can also be adjusted and made more flexible to align with learners' requirements and daycare availability schedules.

It is imperative to garner family support for OSY learning and skilling, and the Opportunity 2.0 program can work with YDAs and Youth Development Organizations (YDOs) at a barangay level to develop a family outreach program. The family outreach program should focus on convincing the families of OSY to prioritize learning and skilling despite family challenges by making them aware of learning, skilling, employability, and the psychosocial benefits that can be achieved through ALS, TVET, or other programs meant for OSY.

Family outreach can be integrated with youth volunteering programs and can be made more participative by engaging parents in preparing meals and venues for learners. The family outreach can be extended to orient barangays, village, tribal, and religious leaders to create safe spaces for learning with their support. The online or flexible module learning options should be prioritized where providing a safe learning space is difficult. The Opportunity 2.0 program can coordinate with DSWD Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) to integrate Pathways Orientation of the Youth (POY) or Work Ready Now (WRN) with the family outreach programs and include psychosocial & mental wellness interventions and resiliency modules. The outreach campaign strategy should also focus on gender stereotyping and discrimination, negotiating life choices, harassment, intergender communication, and inter-generational communication at the barangay level. The Opportunity 2.0 program could also partner with organizations that focus on the LGBTQ+ community, indigenous people, and other such social groups to effectively deliver the outreach programs.

Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library

Limited accessibility of OSY programs

Barriers to enrollment and program completion

The accessibility to learning through physical or digital learning environments is a critical factor in ensuring that OSY readily enrolls for learning. There could also be instances where OSY, though initially enrolled in the program, later discontinued the program upon facing challenges with accessing the course. Hence, accessibility is a barrier not only to enrollment but also to program completion after enrollment.

It appeared as a common theme among the OSY participants that the geographic distance from the home to the learning centers deters the OSY from enrolling in the program. It becomes particularly challenging for rural learners who, despite spending more time attending the program sessions, end up attending fewer sessions than their urban counterparts due to time spent traveling to the learning centers. A World Bank study reported that 60% of enrollees could attend ALS sessions once or twice a week, and only 35% of learners attended the sessions more regularly. On average, male participants attended more sessions than female participants.⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak pushed the ALS and TVET programs to rely on online learning to ensure continuity of learning. The enrollment patterns demonstrate that learners also tried to adjust to the new normal given that the TESDA online program (TOP) witnessed over 2 million registrations during the period March 2020 (since the government-imposed travel restrictions started) to October 2021, which is over half of the registrations since TOP inception in 2012.²⁴ However, the adjustment to the new normal required access to laptops, smartphones, and stable and reliable internet connections to support online means of learning. Unfortunately, Some of the OSY participants mentioned that they found it challenging to adjust to the new normal due to the lack of laptops, smartphones, and the internet. A DepEd survey indicated that 2.8 million students have no means to go online. Out of 6.5 million students who have access to the internet, approximately 20% of them use public places to go online. 53% of the population resided in rural areas, where internet access and speed can both be significantly challenging.⁴⁴ At least 1.1 million students did not enroll for the school year 2020 to 2021 due to various reasons, including lack of internet access.⁴⁵

A survey conducted by the global software firm Desire 2 Learn (D2L) reported that internet connectivity was cited by 78% of students as a challenge to remote learning, which is the highest among all other challenges included in the survey.⁴³

Improvement initiatives

The OSY participants largely agreed that the learning centers are quite widespread. However, the learning center availability in proximity could be improved further, especially in rural and remote barangays. In the case of distant learning centers, a robust, free, and safe transportation system, which could pick up and drop up the OSY from their home, can be crucial in improving enrollments and will further lower the financial burden for OSY. Local DepEd and TESDA offices could advocate with barangays for barangay vehicles to be provided to transport ALS and TVET learners to their respective learning centers.

To facilitate online learning, the Opportunity 2.0 program could advocate with DepEd and TESDA to provide OSY with increased access to laptops or smartphones in partnership with the private sector. The OSY could later return these devices to avail of some non-monetary benefits. Similarly, internet connection support could be provided through SIM cards with more significant data usage limits supporting high-speed internet connections to access learning content.

Inadequate ALS physical infrastructure serving OSY

Barriers to enrollment and program completion

The infrastructure of learning centers critically impacts OSY's motivation to enroll in and complete the program after enrollment.

The FGD and PI participants mentioned that the ALS learning center infrastructure is often inadequate. There are 26,209 ALS Community Learning Centers across the country.⁵² However, only about 1,000 were considered conducive learning environments with the necessary facilities to implement the ALS JHS-level curriculum.⁴⁶ The participants highlighted that the ALS learning centers sometimes lack basic furniture, e.g., chairs, desks, etc., as well as computers and other teaching aids. There are cases in which there are no learning centers at all, and often, the classes are held in any available space, such as public schools, community centers, gymnasiums, basketball courts, or any other temporarily available space. It was reported that, at times, the OSY are asked to move out of public-school classrooms to prioritize the needs of regular students. The ALS learning facilities are divided into five categories based on their construction and facilities (Table 2). A World Bank report of 2018 found that out of different types of learning facilities, ~50% of ALS learning facilities are of Type 1 and Type 2, and less than 10% of learning centers are of Type 5. The situation worsens in remote areas where Type 1 and Type 2 learning centers constitute over 70% of all learning centers.⁸

The OSY also highlighted issues related to lack of access to water and functioning sanitation facilities at the learning centers. Poor sanitation facilities pose more challenges to female OSY. The sanitation issues affect not only ALS but also the formal schools, where over one-third of schools in the Philippines do not have gender-segregated toilets, and close to 20% of schools do not have access to sanitary pads.⁴⁷

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Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library

Table 2	Classification	ofAISI	arningf	acilities ⁸
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Туре	Description of ALS Community Learning Centers
Type 1	 Simple, temporary meeting place with tables and chairs, or Any open multipurpose area or any private property temporarily lent for learning purposes
Type 2	 Semi-permanent structure made of light materials with basic furniture and learning equipment It may or may not be dedicated to ALS learning sessions and related activities
Туре 3	 Typical barangay learning center, permanent and secured, with basic furniture and learning equipment It may or may not be dedicated to ALS learning sessions & related activities
Type 4	 2 or 3-storey building fully equipped with the basic furniture and advanced IT for learning Dedicated to ALS learning sessions and related activities
Type 5	 Permanent building equipped with ALS, other learning materials and equipment needed to fully teach the ALS K to 12 curriculum Utilized by learners and other members of the community and functions as a resource center Materials are transported house-to-house or borrowed by individual interested community members

Improvement initiatives

A World Bank study highlighted the importance of a better learning environment on program attendance and completion, though without establishing a definitive causal relationship. The most well-equipped facilities (Type 5) increase the chances of ALS participants completing the program by 19 percentage points.⁸ Further, increased funding for educational materials, such as learning modules, computers, printers, and other items, could increase the ALS completion rate by 2 percentage points.⁸

The FGD and PI participants also resonated with the idea that improving learning centers' infrastructure and learning resources could improve enrollment and completion rates. A well-equipped dedicated learning center, having computers, boards, printers, basic furniture, the availability of learning modules that could be taken home, and hygienic sanitation facilities would positively impact the OSY morale and, hence, the enrollment rates. DepEd should focus on infrastructure upgrades, which would require significant funding. However, the budget for ALS has remained at less than 1% of the public basic education spending.⁴⁸ The Opportunity 2.0 program could provide technical advice to DepEd BAE on preparing justifications for increasing budgets related to community learning center construction and refurbishment.

Academic and psychosocial challenges while pursuing the programs Barriers to program completion

The benefits of the programs meant for OSY are truly realized only upon successful completion of the programs. However, unfortunately, many OSYs find themselves in difficult situations where they feel compelled to discontinue from the OSY programs post-enrollment while pursuing the program.

Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library

The FGD and PI participants mentioned that the OSY sometimes find the course curriculum challenging to understand and keep up with the learning requirements as per the syllabus, which causes mental stress and eventually leads to them discontinuing their studies. The COVID-19 pandemic also had an impact on the mental health of wider Filipino society, where a survey reported moderateto-severe anxiety for one-fourth of respondents and moderate-to-severe depression for one-sixth of respondents.⁴⁹ It can be derived that OSY would also have faced increased mental stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Filipino education systems also face severe challenges of bullying, with DepEd logging over 260,000 cases of bullying in SY 2021-2022.⁵⁰ The Philippines has the highest incidence of bullying, with 65% of students reporting that they were bullied at least a few times a month. Bullying is often gender discriminatory where more females (70.5%) than males (59.8%) have experienced bullying.51

The LGBTQ community is particularly at risk of sexual violence at school, often from peers. The members of the LGBTQ community who participated in the FGD and PI also cited that they faced discrimination. They had to drop out of the formal K to 12-system due to their gender identity. Unfortunately, they again had a similar experience. Such an environment in learning centers leads to adverse psychosocial impacts on OSY, and it may compel them to discontinue the program.

This issue with retention of OSY in the programs serving OSY post-enrollment appears more pronounced for ALS compared to TVET, as during 2019 – 2021, approximately 30% or more ALS learners didn't complete their course post-enrollment.¹⁷ On the other hand, in the case of TVET, less than 10% of learners discontinued the course post-enrollment for 2021 and 2022 – though this data is for the general TVET population only.²⁵ There is no available disaggregated data on dropout rates of OSY enrollees to TVET programs.

Improvement initiatives

When it comes to the education and skilling journey of the OSY through the OSY programs, it is equally important to emphasize the retention of OSY as it is to make the OSY enroll, or else the efforts made to enroll the OSY stand to go in vain.

The Opportunity 2.0 program, in partnership with DepEd and TESDA, can play an instrumental role in advocating for the ALS and TVET learning centers to identify OSY with special learning requirements and provide them with individual tutorship facilities and extended support through peer learning. Further, OSY could be referred by their ALS teachers or TVET trainers to counseling services to help them with issues related to mental health. The Opportunity 2.0 program can collaborate with DepEd, TESDA, YDAs, and YDOs to launch a gender inclusivity campaign to make OSY and ALS teachers and TVET trainers more sensitive towards the needs of other genders and create an inclusive environment for all genders.

Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library

Conclusion

OSY enrollment trend

The Philippines has an estimated 3.75 million OSY in the age group 15 years – 24 years as of 2020.²

The Philippine government has been running two flagship programs: Alternative Learning System (ALS), focused on basic education, and Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET), focused on skilling, for the socio-economic upliftment of the OSY. The analysis of enrollment trends highlights some key similarities and differences in how both programs have reached the OSY, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ALS enrollments experienced a peak in SY 2018-19 for learners aged 15 to 24 years, just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 7). However, the pandemic caused a decline in ALS enrollments in SY 2019-20, with a reduction of approximately 18% compared to the peak in SY 2018-19, and the decline continued in SY 2020-21. Positive signs of recovery were observed in SY 2021-22 and SY 2022-23, as ALS enrollments increased and reached around 85% of the peak enrollment in SY 2018-19. Projections indicate that ALS enrollments are expected to gradually reach near the pre-pandemic levels by SY 2025-26.

Similar to the ALS, TVET enrollments also experienced a peak in 2019. However, the decline in TVET enrollments was much more significant, with a drop of more than two-thirds in 2020 over the peak of 2019 (Figure 8). This sharp decline was mainly due to low community-based and institution-based enrollments, as they had to abide by the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, which prohibited face-to-face training (Table 1). On a positive note, these delivery modes have shown signs of recovery post-2020 with the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. The projections indicate that TVET enrollments will revert to near pre-pandemic levels by 2025 (Figure 8).

The contrast of decline in ALS (a decline of ~18%) and TVET enrollments (a decline of ~66%) due to COVID-19 in 2020 over 2019 enrollment numbers could be attributed to the inherent delivery mechanism of both programs. The ALS program is flexible with classroom location and schedules. It has promoted independent learning as well as remote learning with a modular approach. ALS teachers and facilitators are also responsible for reaching out directly to the ALS learners at a barangay and house level to enroll them in the ALS program. On the contrary, TVET skill trainers have no direct role in learner mobilization. Further, the TVET courses are largely delivered in a physical mode in designated centers, as per the practical learning requirements of skilling programs. This delivery mechanism led to a setback to the TVET enrollments when COVID-19 restrictions were implemented and prohibited center-based face-to-face-instruction. On the other hand, the TESDA online program (TOP) registrations increased after the COVID-19 restrictions were imposed in March 2020. However, this increase was insufficient to prevent the massive overall national drop in TVET enrollments.²³ As the COVID-19 situation further eases, TVET enrollments in face-to-face courses are expected to gradually revert to pre-pandemic levels.

The combined ALS and TVET enrollments, when compared against the total OSY population, reveal a very low enrollment rate for these two flagship programs serving OSY, assuming all enrollees aged 15 years – 24 years are OSY. Out of the estimated 3.75 million OSY (approximately) in the Philippines aged 15 years – 24 years, less than one-fourth of them were covered by ALS and TVET in 2020, which is less than half of the enrollment rate in 2019.² The enrollment rate by region could not be determined due to a lack of accurate data on OSY and enrollments with regional distribution. It is worth noting that this rapid assessment study had to rely on several data estimations due to a lack of available data on OSY and enrollments. Hence, it is highly recommended that a systematic data collection mechanism be established.

Several multilateral concerted efforts are being undertaken to increase the enrollment of OSY in ALS and TVET programs. The ALS program focuses on ICT support to the learners, launching new ALS modules, improving its CLC learning environments, and special initiatives to enhance the inclusivity of its programs, e.g., for OSY with disabilities, IP learners, and female learners.

The DepEd BAE also plans to develop and launch an advocacy and social mobilization program to help boost enrollment in ALS programs and improve the "ALS brand" amongst stakeholders, with technical support from the Opportunity 2.0 program. TESDA is focusing on increasing enrollments through a partnership with industries and other government agencies and rebranding TVET skilling courses as a viable option for the youth. TESDA is also strengthening its e-learning (TOP) by adding more courses and has witnessed significant growth in registrations since the COVID-19 pandemic.

To make the initiatives mentioned above a success, it is imperative to understand the barriers faced by OSY with enrollment and their expectations and co-create potential solutions that could increase enrollments.

Education and skilling journey barriers

The education and skilling journey of an OSY can be classified into four stages - Awareness of the programs, Impact value understanding by the OSY, Enrollment in the programs, and Program completion, ultimately leading to the realization of expected program benefits, which could be an education diploma, skills for employment or entrepreneurship and other psychosocial benefits.

The FGD and PI thematic data analysis highlighted eight key barriers across the education and skilling journey, which are limited reach of in-person awareness and enrollment channels, limited online information about OSY programs, enrollment system's limited success in persuading OSY of program benefits, financial constraints faced by OSY, inconducive home environment for studying, limited accessibility of OSY programs, inadequate ALS physical infrastructure serving OSY and academic and psychosocial challenges while pursuing the programs. These barriers tend to impact different stages of the education and skilling journey. The input of the FGD and PI participants focused mainly on everyday experiences regarding the ALS and TVET programs. However, specific differences emerged between the two programs, and they have been clearly noted in the report as applicable to the particular barriers.

Awareness is the first step towards enrollment, and the OSY and their family members should have adequate information about the available ALS and TVET programs to be able to consider enrolling in these programs. However, the level of awareness has been constrained due to the limited reach of in-person and online mediums. The in-person medium primarily consists of door-to-door house visits by officials and volunteers. However, OSY participants shared that in their experience, barangays in rural and remote areas lack coverage for house visits. On the other hand, though the online medium serves the purpose of mass engagement and direct reach to youth, it faces challenges related to lack of details, lack of guery resolution mechanism, and false and inaccurate information. Further, once OSY are completely aware of the available program options, they must be convinced of the expected benefits of enrolling and completing the program. A high level of acceptance for program outcomes is critical as OSY are often struggling with time and resources, which they can dedicate to learning and skilling only if they can highly appreciate the potential program outcomes. To ensure the desired level of acceptance for program outcomes among the OSY, it is crucial to both generate significant opportunities and effectively convey these potential outcomes to the OSY. Currently, TVET programs are valued highly among the OSY, given their direct linkages to employment, but the ALS program value has mixed perceptions among the OSY in terms of its contribution to employment readiness. ALS is considered a stepping-stone for higher education, where the outcomes materialize only in the long term. The program also lacks societal appreciation among some stakeholders. Moving on with the education and skilling journey, a complete awareness of the program and acceptance of their potential outcomes may still not lead to actual enrollment by OSY. OSYs face some more barriers at the enrollment stage that may impede their final decision to enroll, viz. financial constraints faced by OSY, inconducive home environment for studying, limited accessibility of OSY programs, and inadequate ALS physical infrastructure serving OSY. Financial constraints emerged as the biggest barrier behind low enrollments. The financial constraints in the context of OSY refer to the opportunity costs (employment income lost while attending the program) and overhead expenses incurred (travel, meals, and study supplies). The adverse impact of COVID-19 further exacerbated the financial health of OSY families and amplified this barrier to enrollment.

Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library

The family situation of OSY may also make it difficult for them to prioritize learning and skilling. OSY who are single parents, especially teenage parents, find it challenging to balance their responsibilities as primary caregivers along with studies. Incidences of abuse and domestic violence can also derail the education and skilling journey of OSY. Some OSYs also face restrictions due to social and family customs. COVID-19 further aggravated the family challenges with an increase in cases of domestic abuse.

Further, the accessibility or rather ease of access, either to physical or virtual learning environments, plays a crucial role in the decision to enroll. ALS or TVET learning centers, located far away, deter OSY from enrolling due to increased cost and time commitments. The issue of virtual access has become significantly more prominent in the aftermath of COVID-19. While the emphasis on online learning ensured learning continuity, it posed challenges to OSY who had limited access to laptops, smartphones, and reliable internet connections. The lack of adequate infrastructure for well-equipped and hygienic learning centers may further discourage OSY from enrollment.

Even if it is surmounted initially to enroll in the programs, the barriers at enrollment stages may resurface later. They can compel OSY to discontinue their education and skilling journey.

Additionally, some of the OSY may face academic and psychosocial challenges while pursuing the programs, which could force them to discontinue the programs post-enrollment. OSY may find it challenging to understand the course curriculum, leading to increased mental stress, or they may face bullying, violence, or gender discrimination, all of which pose severe barriers to program completion.

Improvement initiatives

The barriers showcase the further scope of stepping up the efforts aimed at the socio-economic upliftment of the OSY through learning and skilling. The Opportunity 2.0 program can make interventions across the education and skilling journey in partnership with other Philippine government and non-government organizations such as DepEd, TESDA, Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), DSWD, SK, YDA, YDOs, and other volunteer groups.

The Opportunity 2.0 program can further support the efforts of DepEd to intensify its caravan campaign to increase the reach of door-to-door house visits, especially in remote and rural barangays. Opportunity 2.0 can provide technical assistance to DepEd and TESDA to develop and launch a social marketing campaign to increase OSY enrollments. The Opportunity 2.0 program should work with DepEd, TESDA, and other stakeholders to explore avenues for enhancing program returns, especially for ALS. This support includes mobilizing the Youth Development Alliances to strengthen post-program support activities for ALS completers, including providing access to internships, TESDA and HEI scholarships, and TVET short courses designed to enhance immediate employability.

The Opportunity 2.0 program can provide technical assistance to DepEd BAE to develop and launch a large-scale rebranding campaign for ALS addressing employers, higher institutions, family members, peers, and society to alleviate the ALS program's social perception. It can also assist DepEd in revamping the awareness campaign content to emphasize the impact value of the programs. The Opportunity 2.0 program can provide technical support to DepEd and TESDA to help OSY with their most significant barrier to enrollment, i.e., financial constraint. It can include advocating to prioritize OSY for financial assistance through existing programs of various agencies and supporting LGU-level budget planning for scholarships, travel, meals, and study supply allowances. Opportunity 2.0 could also promote developing and pilot-testing innovative financial support initiatives for employed OSY to counter the opportunity costs of studying. This includes incentives for employers to allow OSY to have time off work to complete their studies through dual training programs, subsidies, and tax incentives.

For barriers related to the inconducive home environment for studying, the Opportunity 2.0 program can support the efforts of the YDAs in getting OSY access to daycare centers. It can assist DepEd in developing a family outreach program to convince OSY families to prioritize the learning and skilling of the youth. The Opportunity 2.0 program can improve accessibility to physical learning centers by supporting YDA efforts to advocate for the transport of OSY through barangay vehicles. It can advocate with DepEd and TESDA to enhance virtual (online) access by exploring partnerships with private sector organizations and other stakeholders to leverage purchasing laptops, smartphones, and SIM cards with internet connections for OSY. The Opportunity 2.0 program can also provide technical assistance to DepEd in developing financial proposals for increasing funding for ALS community learning center construction and infrastructure upgrades. It can work with the YDAs to promote OSY access to counseling services through referrals to address mental health challenges. The Opportunity 2.0 program can partner with DepEd, TESDA, and organizations specializing in gender issues to develop and launch a gender inclusivity campaign to make OSY and ALS teachers and TVET trainers sensitive towards the needs of other genders and create an inclusive environment for all genders.

As the next steps, the abovementioned initiatives require a diligent feasibility study, prioritization, and implementation roadmap.

Image source: Opportunity 2.0 program image library

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About Opportunity 2.0

USAID's Opportunity 2.0 (O2) is a five-year program designed to strengthen national and local capability in the Philippines to provide out-of-school youth (OSY) with quality education and learning experiences, inspire life-long-learning, and lead to improved education, livelihood, or employment opportunities. Through the establishment of partnerships and the strengthening of networks in 15 cities across the country, O2 will reach 180,000 out-of-school youth, train over 2,000 teachers and engage 2,200 companies.

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