The Philippines has made significant progress in access to and quality of formal basic education in recent years (National Economic and Development Authority [NEDA], 2017). Yet more than 11 per cent of adolescents drop out before reaching the last grade level in junior high school (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2020). In 2017, about 9 per cent of the population aged 6 to 24 were not attending formal school, and about 83 per cent of those were 16 to 24 years old (Philippines Statistics Authority [PSA], 2017). Once students drop out of school, many of them end up either unemployed or with menial jobs that pay low wages and offer little job security.

The Department of Education (DepEd) established the Alternative Learning System (ALS) as a parallel education pathway for those who did not finish basic education via the formal school system. ALS teaches functional literacy skills as well as prepares learners for the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Test, which awards passers a certificate equivalent to a formal elementary or junior high school degree. ALS is one of the priority programmes of current DepEd Secretary Leonor Briones who took office in 2016 (Briones, 2016).

The ALS Task Force was formed as the main coordinating body to implement the programme across the Philippines (Department of Education [DepEd], 2019a). In collaboration with international partners, DepEd aligned the learning content of ALS in 2019 with the K-12 curriculum of formal education to create more synergy (DepEd, 2019b), and the ALS 2.0 Strategic Roadmap was developed to set the programme direction and goals until 2024 (DepEd, 2020).

In 2018, the ALS programme had 840,521 participants, an increase from 641,584 in 2017 (DepEd, 2017; DepEd, 2018). However, there are about 5 to 6 million prospective ALS learners across the country (Yamauchi, et al., 2016, p.21), which means that the programme only attracts about 15 per cent of its target population. Moreover, about 20 per cent to 40 per cent of ALS learners fail to complete the programme (Igarashi, 2018, p.7). Despite increasing learners and A&E Test takers in recent years, the A&E Test passing rate has remained low (Yamauchi, et al., 2016, p.66).

Issues that are associated with access and completion of the ALS programme thus underscore the need for more evidence on the situation of children and adolescents who miss out on the learning opportunities that the programme provides. Such evidence is crucial to inform any effort to enhance ALS delivery and make a more equity-based intervention in learning opportunities and outcomes.
Objectives of the Study

This research intends to identify barriers that out-of-school adolescents encounter throughout their ALS trajectory. By investigating adolescents’ situations, experiences, and perceptions toward the ALS programme, this study explores the reasons why some out-of-school adolescents are not enrolled in ALS, and, even when they are enrolled, why some learners are not able to complete the programme. The study also looks into behavior and motivation of ALS completers to take and pass the A&E Test.

The study will have implications on improving ALS delivery and ensuring more out-of-school adolescents can access and complete the programme to pursue further education and/or employment opportunities. The findings of this study will support DepEd in crafting more nuanced and responsive interventions to reach out to learners who need the most support by understanding barriers that prevent them from succeeding in the ALS programme.
Methods

Data

This study uses data collected in seven Philippine regions in 2019 (Figure 1), selected according to where the most vulnerable adolescents may be concentrated (PSA, 2016). This includes regions with high poverty incidence, geographically isolated rural areas, the prevalence of out-of-school adolescents and ALS learners, vulnerability to natural disasters, and the presence of various ethnic groups. The National Capital Region was included in this study to generate data on the out-of-school adolescents and ALS learners in the urban area.

Interviews were conducted with 500 participants comprising 12- to 19-year-old adolescents whose disadvantaged circumstances resulted in their dropping out of formal school. While random sampling was used to select the participants, identifying and interviewing them were arranged by mobile teachers and instructional managers in each study area. A national consultative workshop was conducted in 2019 to validate and enrich the field findings through in-depth discussions among stakeholders, programme implementers, administrators, and education leaders. A proposed results framework was also developed to address the findings of the research. Ethical considerations were ensured in all stages of the research process; participants’ information was kept confidential and anonymous to protect their privacy, and will not be disclosed in any papers, reports, and presentations.
Analysis

This study analyzes barriers that adolescents encounter in the ALS trajectory (Figure 2). First, situations prior to entering the ALS programmes are examined. Second, among learners who have enrolled in ALS, reasons for completing or not completing the programme are explored. Third, looking into ALS completers, the study investigates factors that may lead some learners to take and pass the A&E Test.

The analysis has some limitations. First, the survey data in this report are given as observed. Second, data are based on adolescents’ self-reported situations, experiences, and perceptions toward the ALS programme. As such, they are subject to potential biases. Third, the research findings are not nationally representative as the survey was conducted in the seven regions that are considered to have the most vulnerable conditions for adolescents. Fourth, data were collected in 2019, and the results depict the situation before the COVID-19 pandemic. These limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the results in this report.

Results

1. Entering into the ALS programme

The ALS programme provided learning opportunities for those who left formal education due to various difficulties.

About 44 per cent of all participants in this study reported that lack of financial support was the reason for leaving formal education, followed by 16 per cent who cited lack of parental guidance, and 15 per cent who stated lack of interest, while 14 per cent attributed their leaving to vices (e.g., drinking and games) (Figure 3). Moreover, about 41 per cent of out-of-school adolescents who were not enrolled in the ALS programme answered that they attempted to go back to school, but lack of financial support prevented them from doing so. The findings are consistent with previous studies where financial difficulty, family matters, lack of personal interest, and peer influence were the common reasons for being out of school (PSA, 2017; Yamauchi, et al., 2016, p.66).

Figure 2: Framework of the study

Note: Numbers in ( ) represent the number of samples

Source: UNICEF, 2021

Figure 3: Reasons for dropping out of formal education

Source: UNICEF, 2021

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On the other hand, about 77 per cent of those who left formal education due to financial reasons were enrolled in ALS (Figure 4). Similarly, those who left formal education due to lack of parental guidance, disinterest, and vices also joined the programme. This indicates that the ALS programme has provided a learning opportunity for formal school dropouts.

![Figure 4: Number of ALS learners who left formal education due to various reasons and enrolled in the ALS programme](image)

A fair number of enrollees learned about the ALS programme through household mapping.

Approximately 15 per cent of those who were enrolled in ALS reported that they learned about the programme through household mapping, followed by about 10 per cent who heard about the programme at town hall meetings. On the other hand, only about 2 per cent of enrollees learned about ALS through social media. This indicates that social media is an underutilized information source about the ALS programme for prospective ALS learners when the study was conducted in 2019.

To attract more prospective learners into ALS, it is crucial to identify and utilize more information sources that are accessible to them. This effort should be part of a broader strategy to promote the programme and encourage enrollment.

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1 Household mapping involves visits by ALS mobile teachers in the barangay (village) to seek prospective ALS learners.
ALS enrollees and non-enrollees equally aspired to finish basic education, while more than half of ALS learners joined the ALS programme because of its flexible schedule.

The findings suggest that there is no relationship between aspiration to complete basic education and the ALS enrollment status (p>0.05). Those who were enrolled and not enrolled in the ALS programme equally wish to finish basic education, while about 91 per cent of out-of-school adolescents who were not enrolled in ALS consider enrolling in the programme in the future.

About 55 per cent of ALS learners reported that they were motivated to join the programme because of its flexible schedule, followed by 35 per cent who enrolled because of a feeling of acceptance. This may imply that flexibility is the attractive feature of ALS, especially for those who may have to work or engage in other daily commitments while attending the programme.

2. Completing the ALS programme

Learners who reported issues with lessons are less likely to complete the ALS programme.

There is a relationship between learners’ feedback on lessons and programme completion (p<0.05). Specifically, 76 per cent of learners who reported that they did not have issues with lessons successfully completed the ALS programme, while the figure was 66 per cent for those who had issues with lessons. This is explicit in their qualitative feedback on the ALS programme. Some learners expressed that there should be more meetings per week or longer sessions for them to fully understand programme content, while others mentioned that there should be added pressure to perform and more assignments given so that learners take lessons seriously. Moreover, some learners shared that some sessions were difficult and that they were not able to understand the explanation of the mobile teachers when English was used as a medium of instruction.

This study found that ALS programme completion was not associated with other factors such as class schedule and distance from a community learning center (CLC) (p>0.05). About 79 per cent of learners who completed the ALS programme commuted to their CLC by tricycle. Also, there is no relationship between ALS completion status and (i) learners’ goals and aspiration in life (p>0.05), and (ii) the skills and knowledge that they wish to acquire in the programme (p>0.05).

In terms of gender, there is no difference in entering the ALS programme between girls and boys (p>0.05). Once enrolled however, female learners are more likely to complete the ALS programme than male learners (p<0.001). 83 per cent of female learners completed ALS, compared to 67 per cent of male learners. This is consistent with the findings of the previous study that female learners are more likely to attend the sessions regularly and complete the programme compared to their male peers (Igarashi, 2018, p.17).

Due to financial and work-related reasons, more than one third of learners were not able to complete the ALS programme.

About 38 per cent of those who discontinued the ALS programme reported that lack of financial support was a barrier to programme completion, while 29 per cent cited work as a reason (Figure 5). Other common reasons for not completing the ALS included peer pressure (21 per cent), lack of parental guidance (10 per cent), lack of interest (10 per cent), and vices (10 per cent). However, almost all (91 per cent) of learners who did not complete ALS intended to return to the programme in the future.

Figure 5: Reasons for not completing the ALS programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Share of ALS programme incompleters (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of financial support</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of guidance</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of interest</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vices</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live-in relationship</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face bullying</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of teachers</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyber bullying</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNICEF, 2021
These are consistent with the previously stated reasons for leaving formal education. Learners who could not finish formal education due to lack of financial support and parental guidance, disinterest, and vices were able to participate in ALS. However, some learners struggle to complete the ALS programme for the same reasons. In particular, financial and work-related reasons remain the most common barriers to completing the ALS programme. This emphasizes the need to provide learners with financial assistance to complete their ALS education.

3. Taking and passing the A&E Test among ALS completers

Some ALS completers were not adequately prepared to take and pass the A&E Test.

About 22 per cent of ALS completers did not take the A&E Test due to lack of time while 14 per cent reported that they were not fully prepared. Among those who took the test, 35 per cent who failed remarked that they were not prepared and 33 per cent found that the test was difficult. On the other hand, a large share of ALS completers who passed the A&E Test reported that their success was due to time to review lessons (76 per cent) and being prepared (72 per cent). It is also noteworthy that 83 per cent of non-passers were willing to take the test again.

The findings suggest that ALS programme completion does not imply preparation for the A&E Test for some learners. Some ALS completers found that they needed more time and preparation to take and pass the A&E Test.

Learners on the job were less likely to take and pass the A&E Test compared to those who are not on the job.

According to the study results, ALS entry and completion are not associated with learners’ employment status (p>0.05). However, employed learners are less likely to take and pass the A&E Test than those who are not employed (p<0.05). Specifically, about 62 per cent of learners who have a job took the A&E Test, compared to about 73 per cent of learners who do not have a job (Figure 6). Among those who took the test, about 38 per cent of learners with a job passed the exam, while the figure was about 55 per cent for learners without a job.

Previous studies indicate that learners’ employment status affects their A&E Test results due to the opportunity costs of attending the programme (Atilano, et al., 2016; Igarashi, 2018). However, this study finds that learners on the job may enter and complete the ALS programme similar to learners without a job, yet they are not fully prepared to take and pass the A&E Test compared to peers who do not have a job.

While DepEd makes ALS delivery as flexible as possible in terms of locations, learning schedule, and plans so that learners can still participate in sessions as they are employed, other measures should also be taken to enhance the A&E Test performance of learners on the job, such as providing test preparation guidance and extra time to review sessions.

Figure 6: Share of those who took and passed the A&E Test by employment status (in %)

- **Took the A&E Test**
  - **With Job:** 62%
  - **Without Job:** 73%

- **Passed the A&E Test**
  - **With Job:** 38%
  - **Without Job:** 55%

Source: UNICEF, 2021
Conclusion

The ALS programme opens opportunities for those who dropped out of formal education by enabling them to pursue parallel education and career advancement. To this end, more analytical work is needed to examine barriers that learners encounter throughout the ALS trajectory so that DepEd can effectively engage those who are hindered from accessing and completing the programme.

This study shows that many learners aspired to finish basic education and decided to enroll in the ALS programme because of its flexible schedule, which enables them to attend to work and/or other day-to-day commitments while studying.

When they joined ALS, learners who encountered issues with lessons were less likely to complete the programme. Moreover, some learners discontinued with the ALS programme for the same reasons they left formal education: lack of financial support and parental guidance, lack of interest, and vices.

To add, learners who were not fully prepared for the A&E Test were not able to take and pass the exam once they completed the ALS programme. In particular, learners with a job were less likely to take and pass the A&E Test than those who did not have jobs.

In sum, out-of-school adolescents who cannot continue with formal education because of various difficulties were able to sign up for the ALS programme. However, to ensure programme completion and improved A&E Test performance, it is crucial to provide active support to learners who may otherwise fall behind during the course of ALS programme participation. More information about policy recommendations is available at UNICEF.

Finally, to fully understand the barriers faced by learners with diverse geographic and socio-economic backgrounds, more in-depth local and nationally representative studies are encouraged to inform evidence-based policymaking for the betterment of education for ALS learners.

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For more information about policy recommendations, read our policy brief ‘Overcoming Barriers to Access and Complete the Alternative Learning System among Adolescents’

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