

Feasibility Study on Micro-certification for the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in the Philippines

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BACKGROUND

The high number of out-of-school children and youth (OSCY) in the Philippines is a subject of deep concern to the country's Government and broader society. The Alternative Learning System (ALS) administered by the Philippines Department of Education (DepEd) is designed to meet the educational needs of these young people by offering a Basic Literacy Program to those who have not developed functional literacy, and an Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Program to those who are functionally literate but have not been able to obtain an elementary or secondary level diploma through the formal education system.

Unfortunately, the number of OSCY who enroll, complete, and pass the ALS programs is quite low. In the A&E Program, this challenge is exacerbated by an assessment system that relies heavily on an end-of-year examination worth 80% of a student's grade. From 2016 to 2018, when the proportion of enrollees who completed the A&E Program was 65%, the proportion who took the exam was only 27% and the proportion who passed was only 18%. The majority of enrollees leave the program without certification of any learning they have acquired, and those who wish to reattempt certification by retaking the exam must wait a year to do so.

MICRO-CERTIFICATION STUDY

Micro-certification is the credentialing of the attainment of small units or circumscribed areas of learning. UNICEF and DepEd, recognizing the potential of this form of certification to improve participation and success rates in the ALS, commissioned the Assessment Research Centre (ARC), University of Melbourne, in partnership with the Assessment, Curriculum and Technology Research Center (ACTRC), University of the Philippines, to conduct a feasibility study of micro-certification in the ALS with the aim of exploring opportunities for learners to receive credit for the degree to which they attain the general, transferable capabilities that are valued by employers and necessary for learners to thrive as workers and citizens. The aim was to use this approach to increase a learner's prospects of gaining employment or entering further education, regardless of whether they complete the ALS program or pass the exam. A range of issues for exploration was identified. These related to the practicality of a new approach to assessment and certification for use in the Philippines, the likely level of trust in the credentials, and the utility of the approach for employers, teachers, and learners. Specific issues included the reliability and validity of results, logistical/administrative feasibility, acceptability of micro-certificates by critical stakeholders and decision-makers, cost-benefit viability, institutional capacity to conduct the work given the technology base available, and the cultural sensitivity of the process.

METHOD

Pre-pilot

A desk review of the ALS and a number of case studies on local and international micro-certification programs were conducted. The review concluded that the value of micro-certificates should be clearly explored with all stakeholders, and their use and credibility communicated, not just to DepEd but to local governments, employers, and education institutions.

Initial Consultations

Under the direction of the Project Advisory Panel, a series of consultations was conducted with critical stakeholders of the ALS programs, including employers, local government agencies, ALS providers, and various units and personnel within DepEd. The aim of these consultations was to canvass attitudes towards micro-certification in the ALS and to provide input to plan for a pilot study to further explore its potential.

It was decided that the Life Skills modules of the ALS program should be the source of the capabilities assessed in the pilot study, as these capabilities or work-readiness skills are essential for success in the workplace and highly valued by employers. Among nine capabilities identified in the Life Skills modules, Communication (in Filipino and English) and Teamwork & Cooperation were chosen to be assessed in the pilot study, as they are two of the most widely practiced and valued capabilities and are readily observable to assessors.

Assessment framework and instrument development

To develop the assessment frameworks for the pilot study on Communication and Teamwork & Cooperation, a series of workshops was held with ALS teachers and local employers who regularly observe learners and workers demonstrating these capabilities. The participants identified behaviors that indicated different levels of performance in the capabilities. These were categorized and ordered to produce the assessment frameworks, which served as the bases for the development of the assessment instruments for the two capabilities. The instruments were made available online and in paper form. In this approach, each learner is assessed using a series of carefully designed rubrics, which are used by three to five trusted assessors who can observe the students as they learn and perform the capabilities. Results are analyzed, aggregated, and moderated to generate a reliable, comparable assessment of the level of attainment of each learner on each capability, calibrated to a set of standards that reflect the progression in skills attained by learners as they acquire the capabilities.

Pilot study

Pilot study participants included Division ALS Focal Persons, ALS teachers, Education Program Specialists for ALS (EPSAs), learners, and raters nominated by learners. These were selected from one division in each of four regions: NCR-Manila, Region IVA-Batangas Province, Region XI-Davao City, and Region XII-South Cotabato. Table 1 shows the number of participants per division:

TABLE 1. Pilot study participants

Division	Focal Person	EPSAs	Teachers	Learners
Manila	1	5	10	150
Batangas Province	1	4	10	150
Davao City	1	4	30	200
South Cotabato	1	5	10	150

For each division, ten learning centers were selected to participate, with 15-20 learners recruited from each center. Assessments were conducted by the learners, their ALS teachers, some EPSAs, and at least four raters nominated by each learner to rate their level of performance in each capability. The raters could be work supervisors, sports coaches, religious figures, community leaders, colleagues or classmates. Instruction sheets were provided to participants to guide them in the recruitment of learners and raters, and in answering the assessment forms. The collection of data for the pilot study consisted of the following process: registration of participants, production and distribution of pilot study materials, assessment period for completion of all the forms, and collection of pilot study materials.

POST-PILOT

Post-pilot focus group discussions were conducted to collect qualitative data on the experience of the assessment process. There were four different groups: Division ALS Focal Persons and EPSAs, ALS teachers, ALS learners, and nominated raters.

RESULTS

The results of the pilot study demonstrated that the trialed model of micro-certification would be a welcome and successful innovation in the ALS. Completion rates were high and analysis of the assessment results showed the instruments to be valid and reliable. The results were used to devise empirically evidenced progressions for the two capabilities. The progressions establish the levels (standards) against which student learning is reported. This forms the basis of a learner profile which can be provided for each learner. Tables 2 and 3 present the progressions with the percentage of learners for each level.

TABLE 2. Learner results for communication

LEVEL	Capability Description	Count	Percentage
LEVEL 5	Master communicator Achieves deep understanding and exercises it to control communications	12	2%
LEVEL 4	Artistic communicator Uses content and style of communication to increase engagement of others	82	12%
LEVEL 3	Adaptive communicator Alters content or mode of communication in response to changing circumstances	337	52%
LEVEL 2	Cooperative communicator Designs communication with others in mind and learns from mistakes	215	33%
LEVEL 1	Functional communicator Speaks, writes and acknowledges other communicators	5	1%

TABLE 3. Learner results for teamwork and cooperation

LEVEL	Capability Description	Count	Percentage
LEVEL 5	Organizing collaborator Encourages resilience and ensures structures are in place to sustain the work of the group	6	1%
LEVEL 4	Value-adding collaborator Performs to higher than required standard and takes initiative to improve the work of the group	210	32%
LEVEL 3	Supportive collaborator Performs own work to the required standard and engages with others to help them perform	401	61.5%
LEVEL 2	Responsible collaborator Performs teamwork without needing guidance and contributes to harmony of the group	32	5%
LEVEL 1	Guided collaborator Engages with others but requires direction to contribute to teamwork	2	0.5%

A hypothetical report for a learner that could result from this method is shown in Figure 1. This illustrates a profile of the learner's attainments, referenced to a common standard, which is described by a progression.

All participants in the post-pilot study consultation meetings saw the benefit of a micro-certificate that described the skills of a learner and regarded this as a potential advantage to a job applicant. The teachers reported that the assessment instruments captured what the learners know and can do, and the different focus groups reported that the instruments were easy to understand and use. Unemployed learners reported greater challenges finding raters, and employed learners reported needing to overcome reluctance in approaching supervisors to participate. However, the nominated raters reported the assessment task as a valuable exercise akin to preparing the character references that are commonly used in job applications. Overall, the participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the instruments and the processes involved in the pilot study.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Results confirmed the utility of the assessment frameworks and the feasibility of micro-certification using the piloted method. Learner performances were found to align with the scales of competence identified in the frameworks, allowing the reporting of results against standards of performance that describe what the learners can actually do. This outcome has a number of important potential consequences for the ALS program. It means that the resulting micro-certificate can provide a prospective employer or education recruiter with more information than a certificate that does not similarly specify the skills acquired by the holder. This overcomes the traditional problem of pass/fail accreditation, in which there is no way to distinguish those certificate holders who achieve only the minimum requirements from those who excel in their attainments. A pass/fail certificate may have great symbolic capital but there is inherent uncertainty about its real value, whereas a credential that specifies the skills acquired by a learner has great informational value, no matter what level of performance is described.

The final component of the project was the preparation of a costed roadmap for the nation-wide implementation of micro-certification in the ALS. The roadmap anticipates a five-year rollout, including policy development, planning, materials development, instrument validation, scaling up, governance, and monitoring and evaluation. A number of areas were identified that would need to be worked through in any implementation. These include the degree to which it is feasible to support the process using internet connected devices of participants, and ways for the process to ensure the inclusion of all sub-groups of the ALS without discrimination.

The roadmap proposes the production of instruments to measure all nine of the capabilities identified in the Life Skills modules and suggests that choices be made at a local level regarding the capabilities most relevant to different settings. The commentary accompanying the roadmap acknowledges that the policy agenda for micro-certification in the ALS includes its application to all components of the program but suggests that the methodology of the current project is more suited to the measurement of general capabilities, and that the micro-certification of other parts of the ALS program might be best served by a different approach. Finally, the roadmap anticipates the need for an advocacy campaign to explain and promote the value of micro-certificates to educators, employers, and the wider populace, and expresses the hope that the current project has contributed to that cause by demonstrating the potential that micro-certificates possess as valid, reliable, trusted, and valued credentials of learning attainment.

Suggested citation: Milligan et al. (2022). Feasibility Study on Micro-certification for the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in the Philippines. ARC & ACTRC.

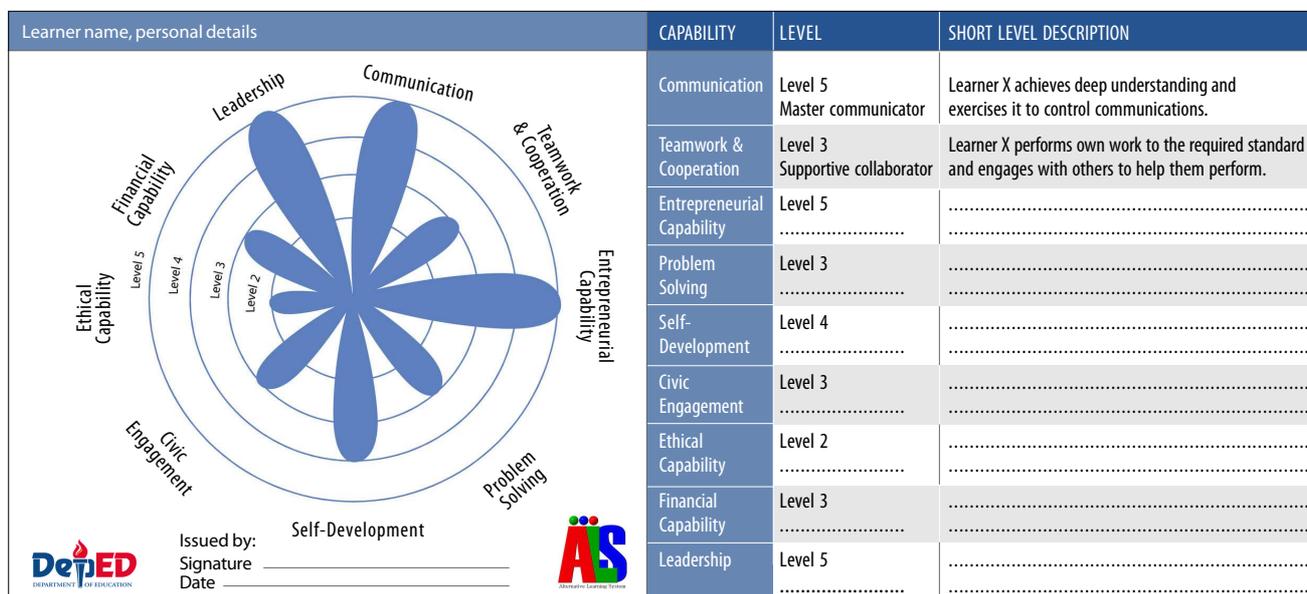


FIGURE 1. Indicative approach to representing attainment in the capabilities