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The learning crisis in Philippine education: An overview

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Introduction

Education moved away from a knowledge-based and instructor-centered paradigm in the 1990s. However, the Philippines has been slow in shifting to learning and lifelong learning. After three decades, educational institutions have yet to embrace learning and learner-focused philosophies, models, and delivery systems. Although several educational institutions adopted learning-focused models long before the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, teachers in many schools continued using traditional teaching methods, with learners passively listening without engaging, thinking, and exercising their brains. While the pandemic catalyzed changes in teaching and assessment across the education system, achieving learning outcomes at all levels remains a significant challenge for the country.

Equally important is the urgent need to deal with the devastating impact of factors affecting learning. These include (1) persistent poverty and other structural constraints such as malnutrition and stunting; inequitable access to early childhood education, educational resources, and home support; and circumstances that compel students from disadvantaged households to drop out of formal schooling in the early grades; (2) a cultural penchant for a college diploma regardless of program quality, resulting in a low valuation in the public mind of technical and vocational training; (3) education budgets and infrastructure support below global minimum standards; (4) the persistent mismatch between the skills and competencies honed in schools and the changing employment/entrepreneurial work requirements that reflect (a) the lack of competencies

Salient Points:

- The paradigm shift from education to lifelong learning was a global response to rapid technological and social changes in the 1990s. It aimed to recalibrate education systems worldwide to focus on competencies (i.e., knowledge and skills applied in context) as learner outcomes instead of only on knowledge as input to learning. The Philippines, however, has been slow in making this shift, contributing to today's learning crisis.
- A diploma is too thin an armor to shield Filipino graduates from the impacts of an unprecedented disruptive future. They need 21st-century competencies (e.g., critical thinking, comfort with ambiguity, problem-solving, communication, collaboration) to thrive in adverse circumstances. Schools and academic institutions must also provide spaces for learners to acquire character-building qualities, such as leadership, initiative, adaptability, and grit.
- However, addressing the learning crisis is not just about shifting education paradigms and supporting a mindset change. Equally urgent is the need to tackle head-on financial, organizational, technical, human resource, and poverty- and inequality-related constraints to learning at different levels of the education system to enable Filipinos, regardless of social class, ethnic affiliation, and geographical location, to cope and thrive in a complex world of multiple disruptions (e.g., global pandemic recovery, climate change, the fifth industrial revolution, geopolitical tensions).

development or the development of transferable skills in all courses (considering that in the 21st century, people are no longer expected to stay in jobs aligned with their college course) and (b) weak academe-industry linkages; (5) snags in developing viable research and innovation ecosystems; and (6) inadequate preservice quality and context-specific in-service training in basic education.

This *Policy Note* provides snapshots of the current state of Philippine education. Unpacking poor learner outcomes and their contributing factors, the Note draws attention to the imperative of addressing constraints to learning at different levels to ensure that Filipino learners acquire competencies to adapt "to the changing requirements of the labor market and for better mastery of the changing time frames and rhythms of individual existence" (Delors et al. 1996, p.100).

Where are we now?

Early childhood education challenges

Early childhood education is essential for reducing learning lags and achieving success in school. Reinforcing this view, Orbeta et al. (2020) show the correlation between starting school early and higher test scores at age 15.

Since the 1990s, the proportion of children aged 3 to 4 attending prekindergarten increased from 3 to 40 percent.[1] Kindergarten participation also increased significantly from 49 percent of Grade 1 students attending kindergarten in 1998 to 98 percent in 2017 (Abrigo and Francisco 2023). While the increase in pre-kinder and kindergarten participation is remarkable, the early childhood education sector faces at least four challenges: (1) chronic malnutrition; (2) the 20:1 ratio of children to child development workers reported in early childhood care and development, which is above the recommended ratios (PBED 2023b); (3) the reports of the Department of Education (DepEd) that 75 percent of the 3 percent who did not complete elementary schooling between school year (SY) 2018–2019 and SY 2019–2020 dropped out between kindergarten and Grade 4, of whom about 60 percent dropped out between kindergarten and Grade 1 (DepEd 2022); and (4) the need to articulate a framework for early childhood education and assess its quality.

Stunting is the most bothersome among these challenges, given its profound implications for the country's future human resources. One in three Filipino children under five years old is stunted, and the Philippines is among the top 10 countries in the world with the highest number of malnourished and stunted children (World Bank 2021).

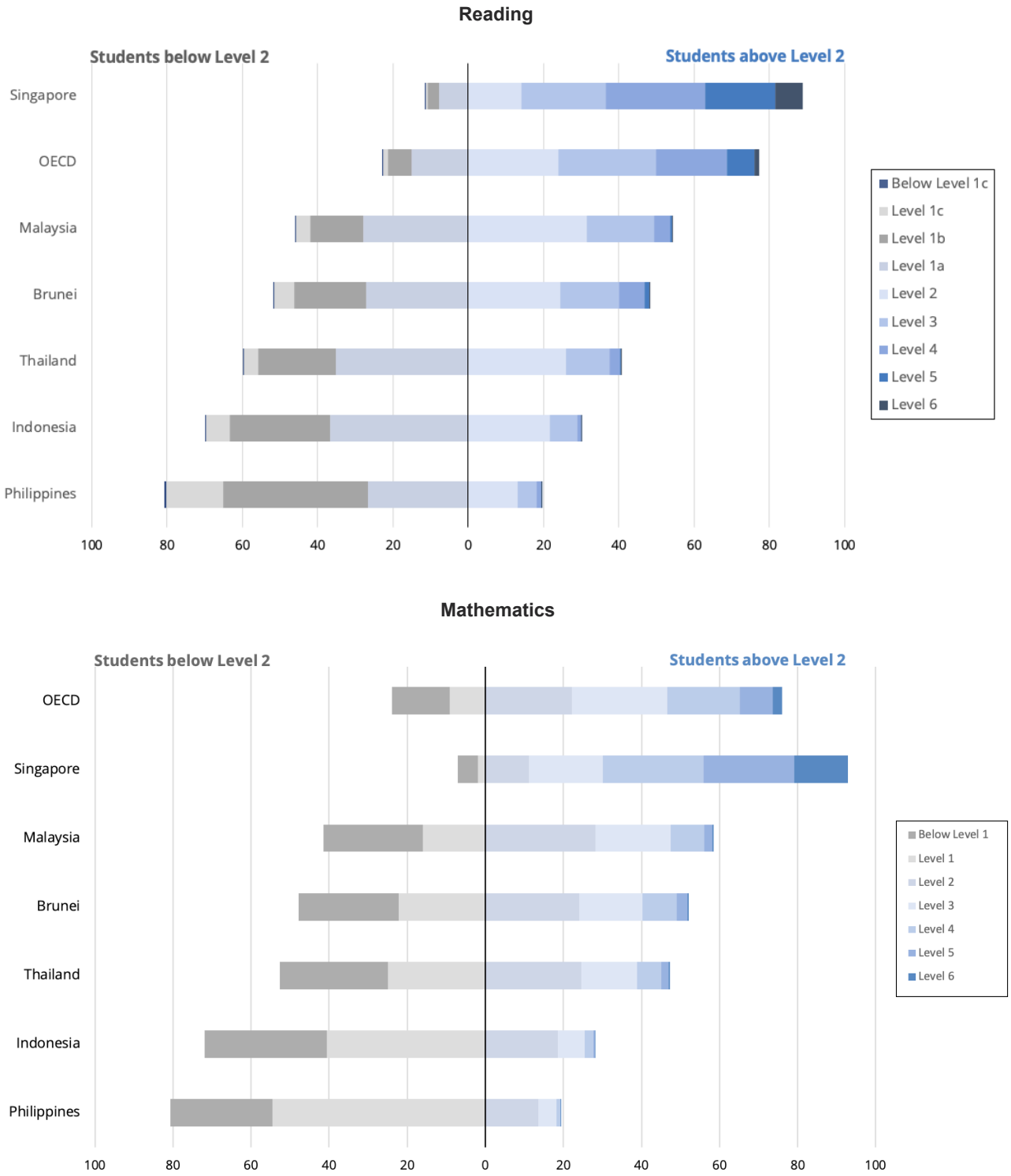
Basic education woes

Increasingly unfavorable data show the Philippine education system treading on thin ice. A World Bank (2022) report on global learning poverty reveals that 9 in 10 Filipinos could not read and understand a simple age-appropriate text at age 10. With the longest school closure among 122 countries and highly unequal access to the internet, digital education resources, and home support, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation.

The World Bank report is just the tip of the iceberg. In 2018, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that only 1 out of 5 Filipino students achieved a minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematical literacies (Figure 1). Moreover, the Filipino students' average scores for both literacies were significantly lower than those of the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Schleicher 2019).

[1] Based on the 2019 Annual Poverty Indicator Survey data

Figure 1. Mean score and percentage distribution of Filipino students in the overall reading and mathematical proficiency by level vis- à-vis ASEAN and OECD



ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations; OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Source: DepEd (2019)

These results highlight the following observations:

1. ***Low proficiency across the board.*** The proficiency level of Filipino students across social class, rural and urban residence, gender, language at home, type of school, and early childhood attendance is dismally low (Figures 2a and 2b).
2. ***Better performance from private schools.*** Students from private schools perform better on tests, but their share of enrollment is continuously dwindling. For instance, the share of the private sector in junior high schools continuously declined from more than 50 percent in SY 1970–1971 to 20 percent in SY 2018–2019 (Orbeta and Paqueo 2022). Note, however, that the country's public schools, which make up about 90 percent of elementary and 80 percent of secondary schools, are of uneven quality, with the performance of the best-performing public schools likely comparable to private schools.
3. ***Multiple interconnected challenges.*** Students' low test scores correlate with the late start of formal schooling at Grade 1 (Orbeta et al. 2020); lack of parental support and low models of aspirations (Orbeta et al. 2020; Bernardo 2023); lack of resources in school, such as learning materials and classrooms (Trinidad 2020); absence of information and communications technologies at home (Bernardo 2023); and prevalence of bullying and lack of discipline in school (Orbeta et al. 2020).

The Philippines is on par with countries with middle-income gross domestic product (GDP) per capita levels in school attendance (Figure 3a). However, in terms of measures of learning, the country falls below potential. World Bank (2020) estimates a learning gap of 5.5 years when the expected years of schooling are adjusted for education quality while students are in school (Figure 3b); this gap is larger than its neighbors. Although the DepEd 2018 PISA National Report (2019) shows that senior high school students achieved significantly higher proficiency scores than junior high school students in all reading subscales and had Level 2 compared to Level 1 proficiency in math and science, the country's estimated learning gap indicates that, in general, an average 18-year-old Filipino student learns less in school than his/her counterpart in comparator countries (Orbeta and Paqueo 2022).

Figure 2a. Equity profile using proficiency levels

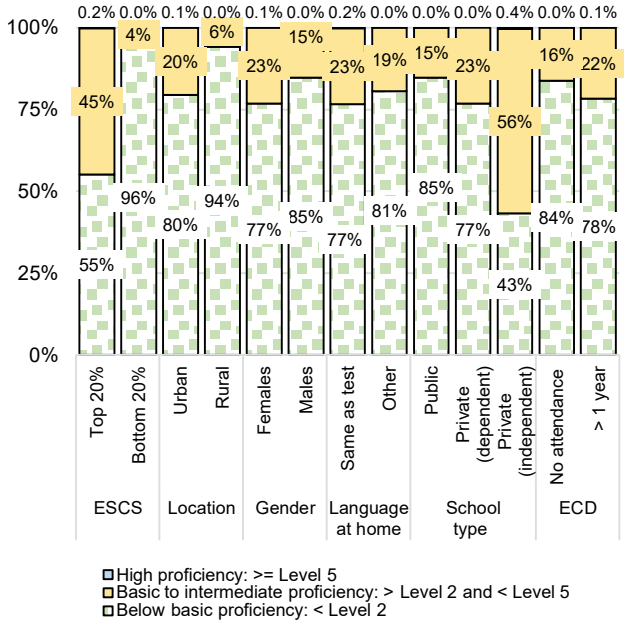
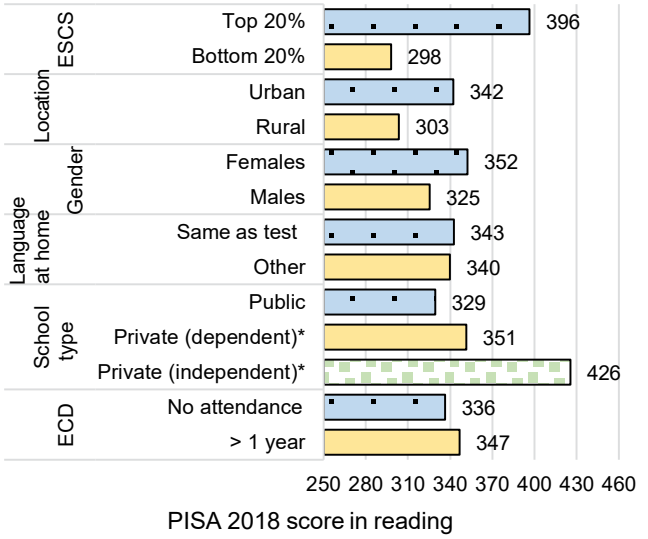


Figure 2b. Equity profile



* Private independent schools: less than 50% of core funding from government agencies. Private dependent schools: more than 50% of core funding from government agencies.

ESCS = economic, social, and cultural status; ECD = early childhood development; PISA = Programme for International Student Assessment
Source: World Bank (n.d.)

Figure 3a. Expected years of schooling and real capital income

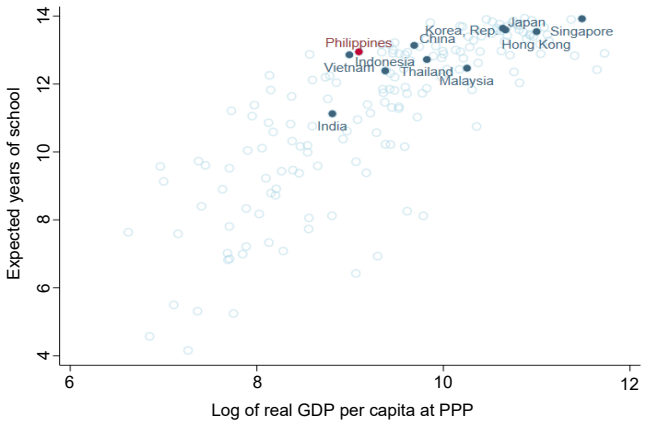
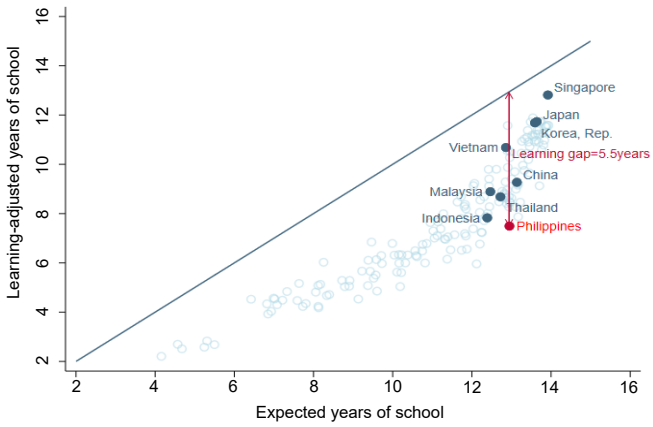


Figure 3b. Learning-adjusted years of schooling and GDP per capita



GDP = gross domestic product; PPP = purchasing power parity
Source: Orbeta and Paqueo (2022), Figures 2.1 and 2.2

Aside from the PISA results, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) reveal the poor performance of Grade 4 students in the 2019 assessment of their math and science proficiencies. Of 58 countries in the study, Filipino students had the lowest proficiency in math and science (Mullis et al. 2020), with their 2019 national average math achievement scoring lower than in 2003 (PBEd 2023b).

Challenges affecting teacher performance also need to be addressed, as teachers are crucial to learning. Among the issues requiring much-needed interventions include subject matter knowledge and pedagogical competencies, especially in high school, vis-à-vis the task of honing 21st-century skills (DepEd 2022); the 56-percent passing rate of teacher education institutions in the Board Licensure Examination for Professional Teachers, which is below the 12-year national passing rates and lower than the passing rates of other professional board examinations (PBEd 2023a); lack of alignment with the Professional Regulation Commission since the licensure examination, albeit resulting in low passing rates, is also the gateway for subpar teachers to be employed; lack of teacher capacity to develop foundational reading and numeracy skills in the early grades, hampering the learning progress in later years (DepEd 2022); poor analytical, synthesis, and evaluation skills and overall lack of preparedness to teach (RCTQ 2017); a pupil-teacher ratio that is among the highest in ASEAN (PBEd 2023b); lack of support for teaching and educational resources on the ground to ensure the proper implementation, feedback, and evidence-based assessment of an intended curriculum; and work demands, including administrative work and community service, that take significant chunks of time away from classroom teaching.

Technical and vocational education concerns

Although increasing in number over the years, public and private training institutions face several challenges. For instance, allocation and spending on technical and vocational education and training (TVET) increased recently, but its spending share in the GDP remains low (Paqueo 2023). The primary sources of TVET funding come from public administration (46%), trainees (29%), companies (16%),

nongovernment organizations and foundations (7%), and income generation (2%) (Peano et al. 2008). A survey by Orbeta et al. (2021) shows that the top reason hindering the youth from pursuing TVET is the lack of funding for tuition or allowance.

Despite the challenges, TVET enrollment and graduates are rising—from 1.6 million in 2010 to 2.5 million in 2019 and 1.3 million in 2010 to 2.2 million in 2019, respectively (Orbeta and Paqueo 2022). The proportion of graduates assessed and certified is also rising (Figure 4a). Interestingly, in 2018, college graduates constituted 34 percent of the TVET graduates, while college undergraduates comprised 27 percent, compared to only 32 percent of graduates with college degrees or some undergraduate credit in 2012 (Figure 4b). This suggests the value given to TVET qualifications for enhancing employment or entrepreneurship opportunities.

Despite these developments, the TVET sector faces several challenges. These include a higher proportion of graduates from community-based training modes that are mostly not covered by training regulations that standardize delivery and enable assessment; employers not giving commensurate importance to TVET certifications—with 60 percent of graduates not receiving incentives despite possessing National Certificates (NCs); more than a third of graduates not getting NCs after graduation (Orbeta 2021); and structural and mindset constraints to the acceptance of TVET credits—more so of learning outcomes from nonformal and informal learning modes—as equivalent to required courses even in ladderized higher education programs.

Higher education issues

Access to higher education in the Philippines remains elusive. Only 17 percent of the country's poorest households are enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) compared to 49 percent from the wealthiest decile (Figure 5). This disparity is unsurprising because household income is the primary determinant of higher education enrollment, with many students from poor households dropping out early in the education ladder (Bautista et al. 2023).

Figure 4a. TVET enrollment, graduates, assessment, and certification 2010–2019

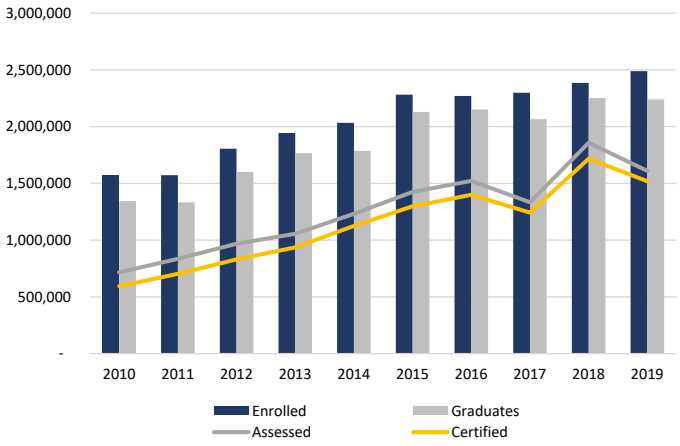
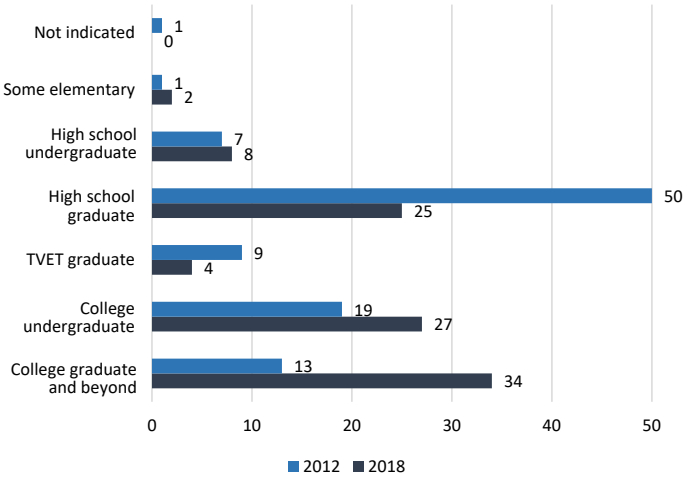


Figure 4b. TVET graduates by education attainment before training 2012, 2018

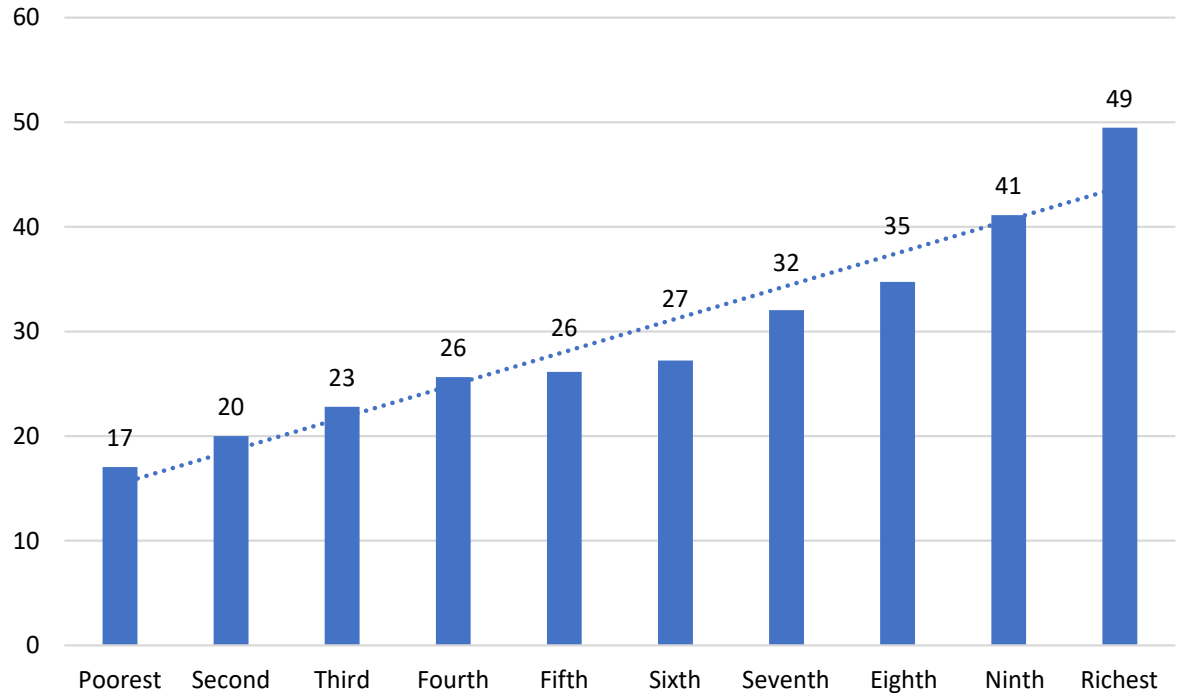


TVET = technical and vocational education and training
Sources: Orbeta and Paqueo (2022); TESDA (2013, 2019)

The quality of higher education is also uneven, as reflected in the relatively poor performance of graduates in board licensure examinations (Table 1), the very few schools in the top 10 of world universities, and the fact that more than half (57%) of the country's Centers of Excellence are concentrated in only two state universities and colleges (SUCs) and five private HEIs out of 1,962 total HEIs, partially explaining the country's underdeveloped research and innovation ecosystem (Bautista et al. 2023).

Poor learning outcomes related to the uneven quality of HEIs contribute to a critical human resource issue. Barrios et al. (2012) surfaced this issue more than a decade ago in the Information Technology and Business Process Management (IT-BPM) sector. Utilizing the results of the Global Competency Assessment Test administered to 21,000 graduating students (indicating supply) and 3,000 new hires (indicating demand) in IT-BPM companies, the basic skills gap between demand and supply was a staggering 21 percent on average.

Figure 5. Net enrollment rate in higher education by income decile, 2019



Source: Bautista et al. (2023)

Table 1. Performance (% passing) in board licensure examinations

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Across all disciplines (overall takers)	36	34	36	43	39	40	39	38	37	38
Across all disciplines (first-time takers)	50	50	54	61	60	60	59	56	57	56

Source: Bautista et al. (2023), Table 41.2

This was broken down into a 29-percent gap in English proficiency, a 25-percent gap in cognitive and learning ability, and a 20-percent gap in computer literacy. Resource persons in the IT-BPM industry suggest that the competency gaps in the study may have become even wider now, considering job roles that require digital literacy, higher-order thinking, and communication skills.

The situation is the same outside the IT-BPM industry, as tell-tale signs of job-education mismatch abound. From tracer data of a nationally representative sample of 11,447 college graduates from SY 2008–2009 to SY 2010–2011, Tutor et al. (2021) found that graduates do not consider having developed sufficient communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Seven out of 10 graduates also claim the irrelevance of their college degrees to their first job, while 1 in 4 believe their outdated skills prevent them from landing good jobs. Nearly half of the students who graduated from programs requiring professional licenses (49%) consider a mismatch between their jobs and degrees (Tutor et al. 2021).

Apart from preparing learners for employment or entrepreneurship, honing research competencies to contribute to developing the country's innovation ecosystem is a higher education mandate. In 2014 and 2019, the USAID-funded Science Technology Research Innovation and Development program assessed the Philippine innovation ecosystem using a model involving five processes: education/human capital development, especially in the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); research/knowledge creation; collaboration between universities and industry; intellectual property, protection, licensing, and commercialization of technology; and startup companies based on technology innovation (RTI International 2019).

The assessment cites several constraints to a well-developed innovation ecosystem. These include training focused on passing board examinations, with an outmoded curriculum that does not expose students to new technologies and a research culture; an ironic oversupply of STEM graduates who migrate or are underemployed—despite the Philippines having only 106 researchers for every million population, below United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) norm of 380, Thailand's 865, Malaysia's 2,308, and Singapore's 7,006 researchers in 2015; absence of a highly developed research culture given the ratio of the country's gross expenditure for research and development to GDP (0.33), below UNESCO's standard of 1 percent; and a small number of university-based research institutions with varying capacities for research, heavy teaching load for researchers, and a relatively underdeveloped research translation, innovation, and technology development system (Bautista et al. 2023).

Cross-cutting challenges

In addition to urgent issues confronting specific education sectors, the country's education system faces the following cross-cutting challenges:

- Lack of coordination among relevant government agencies in adopting, substantiating, and implementing a lifelong learning (LLL) framework and relevant policies, which would entail:
  - A national definition and framework for what constitutes LLL programs, drawn independently from various government agencies and civil society groups to substantiate the *Philippine Development Plan*'s recognition of the value of LLL;
  - Seamless mapping of foundational learning necessary for lifelong and life-wide possibilities for a productive and fulfilled existence;
  - Constructive alignment of the lessons/training plan/syllabi and the curriculum to general and specific learning outcomes;
  - Resource (e.g., stable internet connections and the provision of digital technologies) and training support to mentors to achieve learning outcomes through level-appropriate, technology-enhanced/mediated, and evidence-based learning delivery modes, pedagogy, and assessment that the COVID-19 pandemic helped catalyze;
  - Recognition of prior formal and informal learning and implementation of the credit transfer and banking system;
  - Mechanisms for pathways and entry and exit points in the formal education system to allow individuals to weave in and out of the formal system for employment and entrepreneurial activities, among other reasons; and
  - Alignment with the Philippine Qualifications Framework and the Philippine Skills Framework using learning outcomes as metrics;
- An unharmonized and unevenly implemented quality assurance system that requires being more mindful of the typology and mandates of institutions and the value of a coordinated system of performance measures—especially coordination in the formulation of performance standards;
- An undefined principle of complementarity between public and private education institutions that contribute to the current private education crisis and the need for an authoritative articulation of the theory and logic behind this principle to guide its application;
- Absence of a clear policy for establishing local universities and colleges, SUCs, and their satellite campuses.
- Lack of a roadmap to operationalize the Philippine education system's commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., green and digital transformation) in the different education levels;
- Undefined role of local government units in the governance of the education system; and
- Overall unequal access to quality education requiring sustainable policies and programs for inclusive education across the country's education system.

Particular laws, policies, and programs have been enacted or established to address some of these challenges but have yet to be fully implemented.

Quo vadis Philippine education?

The shocking news about the country's learning poverty, its dismal performance in PISA and TIMMS, the unconscionable stunting of 1 out of 3 under five-year-old children, the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic-induced shift in learning delivery modes, unemployability of graduates, and other perennial issues jolted the education system. These have raised public awareness of a "learning crisis" that does not only reflect education issues but the state of Philippine society. Apart from communicating the urgency of pushing much-needed reforms in the different education sectors and affirming the initiatives of multisectoral groups to address pressing education issues, the learning crisis prompted an urgent review of the entire education system. It specifically compelled the creation of a Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II) that identified 28 priority areas for intervention in early childhood education, basic education, higher education, teacher education, TVET, lifelong learning and learning pathways, and education governance and finance, along with specific issues under each of these areas needing unpacking, legislative or executive action, as well as civil society, people's and private sector initiatives.

EDCOM II is a high-level commission mandated to legislate frameworks and policies to address the learning crisis. While the resolution of the crisis will ultimately depend on carrying out appropriate reformist policies on the ground and iteratively adjusting them during implementation, the timely constitution of the Commission is a welcome shot in the education arm because it offers a rare opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of issues through research and nationwide stakeholder consultations. More importantly, it promises to provide a platform for consolidating interventions and initiatives of diverse groups that work in and for the education sector, forging partnerships across networks of education reform advocates, and buoying up an all-of-society stake in the state of Philippine education. Optimizing the platform EDCOM II could open might begin to move the Philippines out of its learning crisis toward a brighter future for Filipino children.

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Based on existing research, this *Policy Note* was written for the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II), a national commission tasked to undertake a comprehensive national assessment and evaluation of the performance of the Philippine education sector. It is published under the PIDS Policy Notes Series in view of the valuable perspectives it provides on the policy and institutional responses to the challenges faced by the sector.

PIDS Policy Notes are analyses written by PIDS researchers on certain policy issues. The treatise is holistic in approach and aims to provide useful inputs for decisionmaking.

Maria Cynthia Rose B. Bautista and Mark Vincent P. Aranas are board of trustees member and consultant, respectively, at PIDS. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of PIDS or any of the study's sponsors.

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