How Mobile is Extending Education in the Philippines

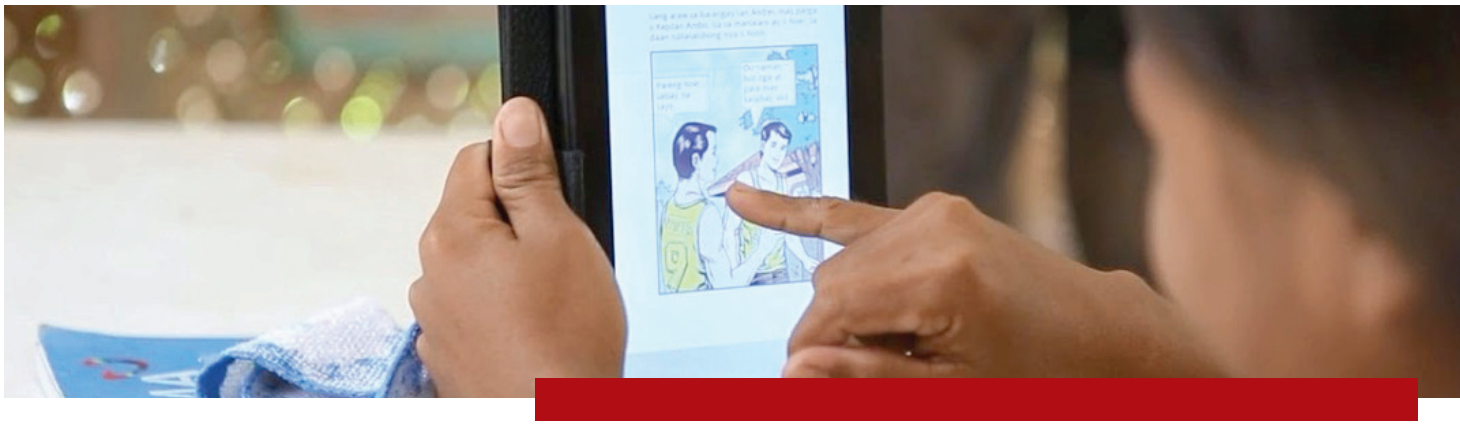
Through mEducation, mobile operators and the Filipino Government are enhancing the lives of millions of young people

For some developing economies, it can be challenging to provide the high quality learning programmes needed to equip their workforce to be competitive in an increasingly knowledge-driven economy. The GSMA, which represents the interests of mobile operators worldwide, is working with its members to help governments overcome these challenges. The goal is to encourage developing countries to make greater use of mEducation services, which employ mobile technologies and services to enable people to learn without having to physically get to a school, college or another educational establishment.

The GSMA is coordinating mobile operators' efforts to bring mEducation services to the communities they serve while, at the same time, increasing digital literacy and opening up new commercial opportunities. To that end, the GSMA is promoting public-private partnerships in a sector where mobile operators can add real value and, with government support, bring benefits to millions of people.

The GSMA's first mEducation initiative of this kind is currently live in the Philippines, where people now have the opportunity to use mobile technologies and services to access lessons and learning materials.

The 2013 estimated population of the Philippines is 98.39 Million
Source: World Bank



Education challenges in the Philippines

With a high birth rate and a youthful population, the Philippines is home to approximately 100 million people with an average GDP per capita of US$4,682. As in many developing countries, socioeconomic realities and family responsibilities often hinder learning in the Philippines, limiting individuals' means and ability to regularly attend school. As a result, many students drop out of school or, at most, perform poorly academically. Over and above the challenges faced by individuals, the Philippines' geography can make it difficult to ensure all young people, no matter where they live, have access to a high quality education. The country is made up of large expanses of mountainous and far flung terrain spread across an archipelago of more than seven thousand islands, all in a region prone to earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, cyclones and other natural disasters.

These socioeconomic and environmental barriers can make getting to a place of education a challenge and low-income families often have limited or no access to education institutions and facilities. As a result, the Philippines has more than six million young people whose employment prospects are hampered by low educational attainment, resulting from non-attendance or very low rates of attendance at school, according to the National Statistics Office of the Philippines. In the Philippines, this population segment is usually referred to as out-of-school youths (OSYs), some of whom might not have attended school for several years.

The Philippines' Government's response was to create Abot Alam ("reaching knowledge" in Filipino), a nationwide programme designed to help "community-based youth through opportunities for education, possible career and employment." In its initial brief, Abot Alam recognised the difficult challenge it faces, noting "despite the efforts of various government agencies to reach out to OSYs in the country, assistance and services still have not been extended to many of them."

Abot Alam's mandate is to align skills development activities with employers' future requirements, expand the reach of education programmes and continually improve the quality of learning and delivery.

The programme began by looking for a cost-effective means to link the six million OSYs into the existing education system.

Leveraging the capabilities of mobile technologies

Many Filipino youths, even in remote areas, have mobile phones. Mobile penetration in the Philippines is over 100% implying there are more subscriptions than people. However, that figure doesn't mean that mobile phones are ubiquitous - some Filipinos have multiple subscriptions and some don't have any. Ovum estimates that 70 million, out of approximately 100 million, of the population have a mobile connection as of 2013.

Moreover, smartphone penetration, according to GSMAi, is still only 17% and most service providers deliver content via text messaging to ensure they can reach all the target recipients.

Text messaging remains very popular in the Philippines with people exchanging some two billion texts on a daily basis.

The country's mobile operators expect smartphone penetration to rise rapidly in 2015, to perhaps 50%, as smartphones become more affordable. Moreover, tablet penetration is already quite high for an emerging market, presently estimated at 30%.

The growing adoption of tablets and smartphones, together with the widespread use of conventional handsets, is paving the way for

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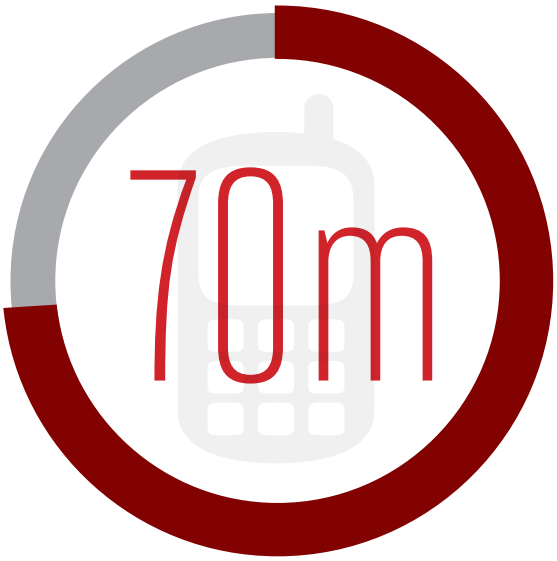

2 Billion text messages sent daily in the Philippines.
Source: Ovum

the Philippines to take advantage of mEducation services, which blend established distance learning methods with the multimedia capabilities provided by mobile technologies.

In September 2013, Irene Ng, Head of Asia Pacific at the GSMA, announced an innovative public-private collaborative arrangement to help integrate mobile technology into the Abot Alam program. The partnership brings together the country's leading mobile operators, Smart Communications and Globe Telecom, and two government departments – the Philippines Department of Education (DepEd) and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA).

The partnership employs an outsourced management model with the education authorities, DepEd and TESDA, contracting the mobile operators to provide mobile learning services for OSYs. As part of Abot Alam, DepEd has set aside a budget to cover the costs for OSYs identified as qualifying for free access to learning. The mobile operators work directly with the apps and content developers to provide mobile-based educational materials.

As well as enabling the government to use mobile networks to improve education opportunities, the partnership also benefits the mobile industry by increasing awareness of the wider capabilities of mobile services.

Population's median age is 22.7 years old
Source: CIA Factbook

Mobile-enabled learning services

The Philippines' mobile operators are offering a variety of mEducation products and services through the Abot Alam programme. For example, Smart Communications is providing the Alternative Learning System app. This app will also be offered commercially as a value-added service through Smart's Massive Open Online Course, which focuses on mobile app development for the Android platform in partnership with the University of the Philippines Open University, the nation's Center of Excellence in Distance and Open Learning.

Globe Telecom is offering the English Proficiency & Training (EP&T) Hotline. It is toll-free and accessible to all Globe subscribers, providing self-paced modules to increase English proficiency among OSYs interested in entering the call center industry.

The mEducation services are accessible on a range of devices, including feature phones using SMS messaging and interactive voice response systems, as well as smartphones, tablets and laptops, which can access apps, as well as online resources and platforms.

The mobile operators use responsive online content management systems to ensure the mEducation services are delivered in a format that is optimised for the student's device. "We match the content to the needs of our target audience," notes Stephanie Orlino, Education Program Head at Smart Communications. The mobile operators are also deploying mEducation apps that run on the Android

smartphone operating system. Android devices are available at relatively low price points, making them more accessible to the target audience.

Yolanda Crisanto, Head of Corporate Communications for Globe Telecom, says: "For inclusivity, usage of lower tier technologies is ideal, as it achieves more reach, specifically to under-developed areas where [adoption] of current technologies [has] yet to reach critical mass." Globe's EP&T Hotline, for example, can be accessed through any basic mobile phone, allowing community members from even geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas to still have access to quality education.

Whichever delivery platform is employed, the mEducation services are aligned with the curriculum defined by DepEd and TESDA to ensure that content and qualifications available under mEducation match what can be achieved through face-to-face learning – and will be recognized by educational institutions and employers alike.

Enabling greater socioeconomic inclusion

For students, mEducation can be transformative. Rather than having to spend limited time and money to travel to a school or college each day, students can access lessons prepared by expert teachers on their mobile devices at work or at home. This provides OSYs with a level of flexibility they need to make returns to education. Moreover, mEducation can tap the growing multimedia capabilities of mobile devices to employ images, videos and games to make lessons engaging and varied.

By harnessing mobile technologies and services, Abot Alam has expanded access to education, giving a million OSYs and other learners the chance to gain qualifications they might have missed during their education age years.
The advent of mEducation is also enabling older learners to develop and improve their qualifications and skills for that next career step. "mEducation," notes Irene Ng, "is an enabling solution that bridges the access gap so that meaningful learning experiences can take place wherever learners are and whatever their financial circumstances."

As well as extending learning and expanding students' horizons, mEducation is also fuelling social mobility: the new services can help to improve the employment prospects of young people from families with very limited financial resources. At the same time, the beneficiaries are now better equipped to make use of digital technologies both in their personal and professional lives. As Irene Ng says, "with the reach afforded by mobile, the mobile network operators in the country have been able to harness mEducation to promote digital inclusion [through lifelong learning] of learners presently on the fringes of Filipino society."

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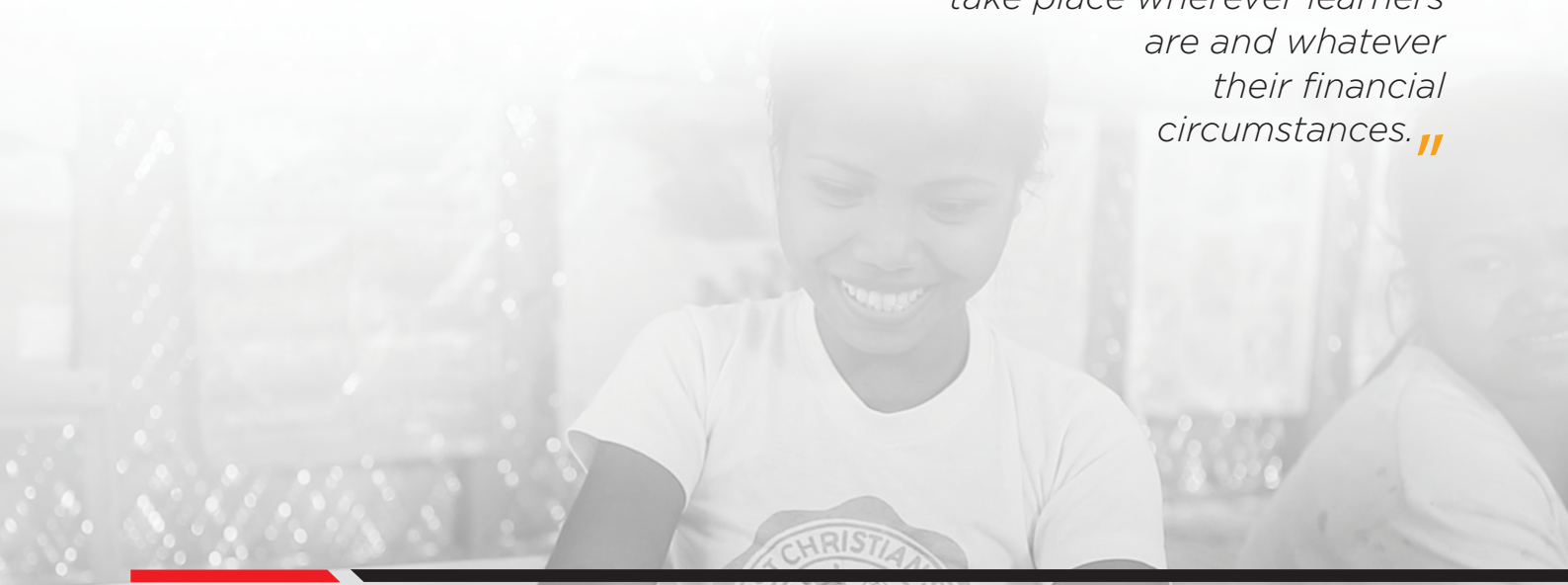

The power of partnership

Harnessing mobile technology to meet the education challenges faced by the Philippines has required each of the participants in this public-private partnership to make a significant commitment. Government departments DepEd and TESDA have embedded mEducation into Abot Alam by preparing existing facilities throughout the country to act as centers from which distance learning via mEducation can be delivered and supported, as well as equipping teachers to act as mEducation facilitators.

In the private sector, mobile operators have invested in the development of localised and relevant mEducation solutions. Additionally, they have supplied equipment, such as tablets, underlining their vision of mobile as a medium that can make a difference. Smart Communications says it is "providing accessible learning opportunities [...] and, as a result assisting our country build our human capital." Globe Telecom expresses a similar sentiment in its objective to "maximise usage of technology to advance 21st century learning."

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At the signing of the mEducation memorandum of understanding, Mario Deriquito, DepEd (Department of Education) | Undersecretary for External Linkages, welcomed the partnership and the positive contribution it can make for the out-of-school youth population.

"Because these young people have been out of school for several years already, they have lost the appetite for learning so we need to make it interesting for them," he said. "We cannot just invite them to come to the classroom and listen to a teacher. We are sure that they will be more interested if we use mobile technology to deliver the lessons."

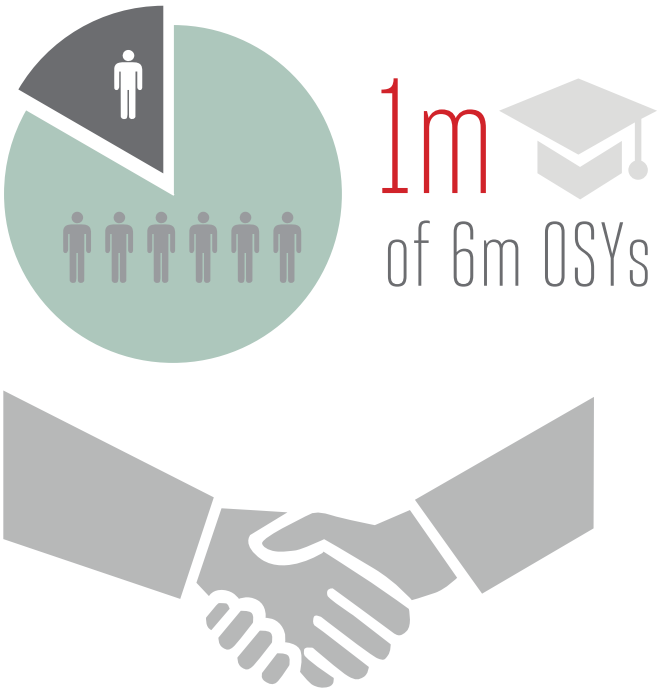
Impact and legacy

With a million Filipino learners accessing Abot Alam initiatives, including mEducation, in their homes or workplaces, the public-private partnership has plans to extend coverage to all of the estimated six million OSYs in the country. The long-term objective is to create a more competitive workforce with a better level of skills. The hope is that Abot Alam, with support from mEducation, can deliver the qualifications that will give employers confidence that they are hiring a well-trained workforce fit for the work and business opportunities of the global economy. This will benefit the Philippines as a whole, and this positive impact on the economy and the population's digital literacy levels will also help mobile operators to grow their customer base.

"We expect that mEducation will become a strong driver for services to upskill Filipino youth, helping them to find jobs in the industries that need them." says Irene Ng. "With mEducation... the mobile operators will be key contributors to both the educational and economic development of the Philippines."

Building on its work in the Philippines, the GSMA is inviting members in other countries to use partnership models to help deliver transformative mEducation services that will add value to individual communities and the broader economy.

1 Million Filipino learners currently accessing Abot Alam initiatives



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