

Exploring the Factors Influencing Alternative Learning System Graduates' Transition to Higher Education: A Systematic Review Based on Social Cognitive and Student Integration Theories

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review explores the multifaceted factors influencing the transition of Alternative Learning System (ALS) graduates in the Philippines to higher education (HE). Guided by Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Theory (SIT), the review synthesizes fifteen national and international studies published from 2018 to 2025. Following the PRISMA 2020 framework, relevant literature was retrieved from Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and Philippine institutional repositories, screened through explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, and appraised using the CASP and JBI checklists. Thematic synthesis revealed five recurrent and interrelated dimensions shaping ALS graduates' higher-education transition: (1) academic readiness and study orientation, (2) institutional support and program linkages, (3) resource and implementation gaps, (4) socioeconomic and personal barriers, and (5) policy and systemic factors. Findings demonstrate that learners' self-efficacy and environmental supports, consistent with SCT, determine motivation and persistence, while academic and social integration, in line with SIT, govern retention and success within higher-education environments. This review contributes to international scholarship on non-formal education pathways by providing an evidence-based conceptual model integrating psychological and institutional determinants of post-ALS transition. It concludes that a holistic approach, strengthening learner empowerment, inclusive institutional practices, and inter-agency coordination, is essential for sustainable lifelong-learning opportunities and equitable access to tertiary education.

Keywords: Alternative Learning System (ALS); higher education transition; Social Cognitive Theory; Student Integration Theory; academic readiness; self-efficacy; educational equity

INTRODUCTION

Access to higher education has long been recognized as a cornerstone for social mobility and national development. It provides individuals, particularly those from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds, opportunities to improve their socioeconomic conditions and actively participate in nation-building (UNESCO, 2020). In developing contexts such as the Philippines, equitable access to higher education remains a persistent challenge due to structural inequalities, poverty, and unequal distribution of educational opportunities (Manzon & Abao, 2020). To address these issues, the Philippine government established the Alternative Learning System (ALS) under the Department of Education (DepEd) to serve out-of-school youth and adults who have not completed formal basic education. Through non-formal and informal learning modalities, ALS offers learners a pathway to earn an Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) certificate, which serves as a qualification for re-entry into formal education or access to technical-vocational and higher education institutions (DepEd, 2022; World Bank, 2018).

The ALS program, conceptualized as a "second-chance education" initiative, aims to reduce educational exclusion by providing flexible learning options adapted to the needs and circumstances of non-traditional

learners (PIDS, 2024; UNESCO, 2022). It embodies the principles of inclusive and lifelong learning, consistent with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which advocates for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2020). However, while ALS has succeeded in expanding access to basic education, transitioning from ALS to higher education remains a complex process. Research has documented several persistent barriers that hinder ALS graduates from successfully enrolling and thriving in tertiary institutions. These challenges include academic preparedness gaps, credential recognition issues, socioeconomic constraints, and difficulties with social and institutional integration (Calabit, 2022; Allera & Paglinawan, 2025; PIDS, 2024).

First, academic preparedness has been cited as a primary obstacle, as ALS learners often come from fragmented educational backgrounds and experience uneven exposure to academic rigor compared to graduates of formal schooling (Calabit, 2022). Second, recognition issues surrounding ALS certificates and equivalency tests persist, as some higher education institutions (HEIs) and employers remain hesitant to fully accept them as equivalent to formal education credentials (World Bank, 2018). Third, socioeconomic and resource constraints continue to limit the ability of ALS learners to pursue higher education opportunities, particularly those in rural or economically disadvantaged areas (Mahinay & Manla, 2025). Finally, institutional and social integration difficulties are commonly reported, with ALS graduates expressing challenges in adapting to the culture, academic expectations, and peer dynamics within universities and colleges (Allera & Paglinawan, 2025).

Given these multidimensional challenges, understanding the factors that facilitate or hinder successful transition from ALS to higher education is essential. This understanding is crucial not only for ALS implementers and policymakers but also for higher education institutions that aspire to widen participation and promote inclusive access for non-traditional students (Tinto, 1993; Bandura, 1986). The transition process is not merely academic—it involves a transformation of learner identity, self-efficacy, and belongingness within the formal education system.

To frame this inquiry, this review employs two complementary theoretical frameworks: Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Tinto's Student Integration Theory (SIT). SCT, developed by Bandura (1986), foregrounds learners' beliefs, self-efficacy, and personal agency in shaping educational behavior and persistence. It underscores how confidence, motivation, and self-regulation influence learners' capacity to navigate academic challenges. In contrast, Tinto's (1993) SIT emphasizes the significance of academic and social integration in student retention and success within higher education. According to this model, persistence is shaped by the degree to which students feel connected both intellectually and socially within their institution.

By combining these frameworks, the present review aims to offer a multi-level understanding of ALS graduates' transition into higher education—addressing both individual psychological factors (e.g., motivation, agency, preparedness) and institutional dimensions (e.g., inclusion, support structures, recognition). Specifically, the objectives of this review are to (1) identify recurring themes and influencing factors across empirical studies, (2) map how these factors correspond to constructs within SCT and SIT, and (3) propose policy, programmatic, and research recommendations to strengthen transition pathways and success for ALS graduates aspiring to higher education.

METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review was conducted following the PRISMA framework (Page et al., 2021) to synthesize existing research on the transition of Alternative Learning System (ALS) graduates into higher education. Academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and JSTOR, along with Philippine repositories including the DepEd and CHED archives and university thesis databases, were searched using keywords like "*ALS graduates transition*," "*higher education access*," "*non-formal education*," and "*academic preparedness*."

Studies were included if they examined factors affecting ALS graduates' access to, persistence in, or completion of higher education programs. Eligible works had to present empirical data, theoretical grounding, or policy analysis directly relevant to the ALS–HE transition context. Both peer-reviewed and credible grey literature (theses, government reports) were considered to capture local perspectives.

Studies were excluded if they focused solely on ALS implementation without reference to higher education outcomes, lacked empirical data, or were opinion-based commentaries. Duplicate records were removed using manual screening. Only English-language sources published between 2018 and 2025 were retained to ensure recency and relevance.

After removing duplicates, studies were screened by title, abstract, and full text. Data extraction focused on publication details, methodology, sample characteristics, and key factors influencing transition outcomes. Thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was used to identify patterns across studies, guided by Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and Tinto's Student Integration Theory. Fifteen studies were identified from Philippine and international journals, theses, and policy reports.

Each study's methodological quality was assessed using the CASP checklist for qualitative research and the JBI appraisal tools for quantitative and mixed-method designs. Appraisal outcomes informed data interpretation by weighting stronger studies more heavily during thematic synthesis. For instance, findings from high-quality studies (scoring $\geq 8/10$) were prioritized in theme construction, while lower-rated sources were used for contextual enrichment rather than core interpretation. This ensured that analytical inferences were grounded in credible and transparent evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A total of fifteen studies published between 2018 and 2025 met the inclusion criteria and were synthesized using thematic analysis. These studies, spanning qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method designs, collectively examined how Alternative Learning System (ALS) completers access, adapt to, and persist within higher education institutions (HEIs).

Across this body of evidence, five interrelated factors emerged: (1) academic readiness and study orientation, (2) institutional support and linkages, (3) resource and implementation gaps, (4) socioeconomic and personal barriers, and (5) policy and systemic factors. Each theme reflects how learner-level mechanisms (Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory) and institutional-level processes (Tinto's Student Integration Theory) jointly shape ALS graduates' persistence and success.

1. Academic Readiness and Study Orientation

Evidence from multiple studies (Calabit, 2022; Mamba et al., 2021; Perater & Paglinawan, 2025) consistently indicates that many ALS graduates enter college with fragmented subject mastery, limited study skills, and low academic confidence. These deficits hinder their ability to cope with tertiary demands and foster feelings of inferiority compared to peers from formal schools.

From the lens of Social Cognitive Theory, these challenges reveal gaps in self-efficacy—learners' belief in their capacity to organize and execute academic tasks (Bandura, 1986). Low perceived competence discourages persistence and goal setting. In parallel, Student Integration Theory posits that academic preparedness directly affects academic integration, a determinant of student retention (Tinto, 1993). Hence, readiness is not only cognitive but also social: bridging programs, study-skills workshops, and mentoring simultaneously enhance confidence (SCT) and institutional connectedness (SIT).

2. Institutional Support and Program Linkages

Studies emphasize that institutional support—mentoring, counseling, flexible admission policies, and peer engagement—is a decisive enabler of ALS graduates' adjustment (Arenal, 2025; Vismanos, 2024). Where HEIs provide bridging and guidance programs, learners report stronger motivation and belongingness.

Through the SCT framework, mentoring serves as social modeling that strengthens self-efficacy and internal motivation. Meanwhile, SIT explains that consistent institutional support facilitates academic and social integration, nurturing commitment to the learning community. Consequently, institutional environments that affirm ALS learners' worth transform perceived marginalization into persistence and achievement.

3. Resource and Implementation Gaps

Uneven ALS program delivery, limited facilities, and variable teacher preparation create disparities in learner outcomes (Mahinay, 2025; Estabillo, 2025; World Bank, 2018). Such environmental constraints weaken the continuity between non-formal and higher education pathways.

In SCT terms, inadequate resources restrict opportunities for observational learning and reduce environmental reinforcement, thereby dampening learners' motivation. SIT complements this view by showing that inconsistent institutional practices obstruct academic engagement, making integration more difficult. Strengthening teacher capacity, digital access, and resource allocation therefore reinforces both self-efficacy (SCT) and institutional belonging (SIT).

4. Socioeconomic and Personal Barriers

ALS learners often juggle economic hardship, family duties, and employment pressures that limit participation in college (Sapaglio, 2025; Local Journals, 2020–2025). Many experience stigma or low self-esteem stemming from non-traditional educational backgrounds.

According to SCT, these barriers interact with internal beliefs about control and agency. Learners with resilient self-efficacy sustain effort despite adversity; those with low perceived agency withdraw. In SIT, financial and social constraints impede both academic and social integration, increasing attrition risks. Integrated interventions—peer support networks, livelihood aid, and psychosocial counseling, can therefore address both psychological (SCT) and structural (SIT) dimensions of persistence.

5. Policy and Systemic Factors

At the policy level, the absence of formal transition mechanisms between DepEd and CHED continues to impede equitable inclusion of ALS completers (Arenal, 2025; DepEd/IJAMS, 2023–2025; UNESCO UIL, 2022). Misalignment of certification recognition and unclear admission criteria create institutional uncertainty.

From the SCT perspective, policy frameworks shape learners' perceived attainability of goals—supportive systems enhance motivation by signaling opportunity. In SIT, coherent articulation policies promote structural integration by ensuring recognition and institutional acceptance. Policy coherence thus underpins both psychological empowerment and systemic inclusion.

Summary Framework Matrix: Mapping Themes to SCT and SIT Constructs

Theme	Social Cognitive Theory (SCT): Learner-Level Mechanisms	Student Integration Theory (SIT): Institutional-Level Mechanisms
Academic Readiness & Study Orientation	Self-efficacy, goal-setting, and academic confidence	Academic integration, learning adaptation, persistence
Institutional Support & Linkages	Environmental modeling, mentoring, motivation, reinforcement	Social integration, belongingness, and institutional engagement
Resource Implementation Gaps	Environmental constraints limiting observational learning	Institutional inequities undermining academic involvement
Socioeconomic & Personal Barriers	Perceived agency, resilience under economic stress	Barriers to engagement, retention challenges
Policy & Systemic Factors	Institutional recognition influencing perceived attainability	Structural integration through policy alignment

Publication Bias and Limitations

Although the review followed systematic search and appraisal protocols, several limitations are acknowledged. Many Philippine ALS studies remain unpublished or inaccessible, creating potential publication bias. Inclusion of local theses and grey literature mitigated this risk, yet quantitative evidence on long-term ALS-HEI outcomes is still limited. Future meta-analyses should incorporate wider datasets to strengthen cross-context comparability.

Comparative Insights

When juxtaposed with global research (UNESCO UIL, 2022; World Bank, 2018), Philippine findings reveal parallel barriers in academic readiness and institutional articulation. However, other countries have institutionalized *bridging programs* and *credit-transfer systems* that promote smoother non-formal-to-formal transitions. This contrast underscores the importance of establishing localized yet globally aligned mechanisms that value non-traditional learning credentials and strengthen inter-agency collaboration.

Integrated Interpretation

Viewing the evidence jointly through SCT and SIT clarifies that ALS graduates' persistence arises from the *interaction between internal efficacy and external integration*. Learners persist when they believe in their capacity to succeed (self-efficacy) and when institutions validate that belief through inclusive policies and social belonging. Hence, effective transition frameworks must develop both the *personal confidence to persist* and the *institutional conditions that sustain engagement*.

Implications For Theory And Practice

This systematic review reinforces the explanatory power of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Student Integration Theory (SIT) in understanding educational transitions within non-formal learning contexts. The findings affirm that learners' self-efficacy, motivation, and adaptive learning behaviors (Bandura, 1986) are inseparable from institutional and systemic mechanisms that support or hinder academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993).

Theoretically, the integration of SCT and SIT provides a dual-level framework, psychological and institutional, that can guide future research on transitions from non-formal to formal education. Practically, it suggests that transition success depends not only on learners' personal agency but also on institutional cultures that value diversity in educational backgrounds.

For policymakers and practitioners, the synthesis underscores the necessity of coordinated inter-agency frameworks, particularly among DepEd, CHED, and HEIs, to ensure that ALS graduates experience continuity rather than rupture in their educational trajectories. Universities and local government units can apply these insights by designing bridging programs, mentorship networks, and financial-aid systems that translate inclusivity into measurable academic success.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study conducted a systematic review of national and international literature from 2018 to 2025 to identify the major factors affecting the transition of Alternative Learning System (ALS) graduates to higher education (HE). Guided by Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Theory (SIT), the study synthesized empirical findings from 15 relevant studies across Philippine and global contexts. Results revealed that the transition from ALS to higher education is influenced by a complex interplay of learner, institutional, and systemic factors;

The study revealed that the transition of Alternative Learning System (ALS) graduates to higher education is influenced by five interrelated factors: academic readiness, institutional support, resource availability, socioeconomic barriers, and policy alignment. Many ALS graduates struggle with academic preparedness, confidence, and study orientation, which affect their adjustment to higher education. Drawing on Bandura's

(1986) Social Cognitive Theory, these challenges reflect varying levels of self-efficacy and the influence of environmental supports on motivation and persistence. Likewise, Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Theory emphasizes that learners' success depends on their academic and social integration within higher education institutions.

Moreover, weak program linkages, limited resources, and systemic barriers such as unclear admission pathways hinder the equitable inclusion of ALS completers. Institutional supports—like mentoring, counseling, and peer engagement—enhance both self-efficacy and integration, fostering persistence and belonging. Overall, successful transition requires a combination of individual resilience and institutional commitment. Strengthening academic preparation, support systems, and policy coordination can empower ALS graduates to navigate higher education confidently and sustainably.

When analyzed through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory, findings highlight that self-efficacy, motivation, and environmental supports are pivotal in determining learner success (Bandura, 1986). Likewise, from Student Integration Theory, results affirm that academic and social integration within the higher education environment are critical for persistence and retention (Tinto, 1993).

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

The transition of Alternative Learning System (ALS) graduates into higher education is shaped by both individual and institutional dynamics. Learners' belief in their own capability to succeed (self-efficacy), combined with institutional support systems that foster inclusion and engagement, determines how effectively they adjust and persist in tertiary education.

Drawing from Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), the study concludes that learners with higher self-efficacy and access to supportive environments exhibit greater motivation and adaptability. From the perspective of Student Integration Theory (Tinto, 1993), academic success is achieved when institutions create opportunities for learners to build academic competence and social belonging.

Therefore, a successful transition framework for ALS graduates requires the integration of learner-centered empowerment and systemic institutional responsiveness. A holistic approach, linking policy reforms, bridging initiatives, and psycho-social support, is essential to transform ALS into a genuine pathway for lifelong learning and upward mobility.

Strategic Policy Implications

Translating this synthesis into action requires a coordinated policy framework that bridges the current gap between the Alternative Learning System and higher education institutions. The Department of Education (DepEd), Commission on Higher Education (CHED), and Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) should jointly develop an ALS–HEI Transition Roadmap that standardizes admission procedures, credit recognition, and learner support mechanisms. Local Government Units (LGUs) and non-government organizations can reinforce this effort by funding bridging programs, academic readiness camps, and mentorship initiatives to ease learner adjustment.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of performance monitoring systems tracking ALS graduates' enrollment, retention, and completion will enable evidence-based policymaking and accountability. Through these inter-agency mechanisms, the Philippines can transform ALS from a “second-chance” education initiative into a sustainable system that promotes equity, inclusion, and social mobility within lifelong learning pathways.

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