

Original Article

Enhancing the Operationalization of ETEEAP through Philippine Embassies, OWWA and HEIs for Saudi-based Overseas Filipino Workers: Towards a Collaborative Facilitation Framework

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the challenges faced by Saudi-based Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in accessing the Expanded Tertiary Education Equivalency and Accreditation Program (ETEEAP) and to propose a collaborative facilitation framework involving Philippine Embassies, OWWA, and accredited higher education institutions (HEIs) to enhance program operationalization. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. The quantitative phase involved a survey of 150 Saudi-based OFWs to assess their awareness, experiences, and perceived barriers in the ETEEAP process. The qualitative phase included focus group discussions (FGDs) with 20 OFWs, analyzed thematically to identify key challenges and recommendations for improving program access and guidance. Quantitative findings revealed low awareness and difficulties in documentation, guidance, and communication, with mean scores ranging from 2.1 to 2.8 on a 5-point Likert scale. Qualitative analysis highlighted themes such as “fragmented support,” “limited accessibility to information,” and “delayed feedback.” These findings served as the basis for the design of a proposed collaborative facilitation framework, which defines coordinated roles for embassies, OWWA, and HEIs to streamline ETEEAP operationalization for OFWs. The study emphasizes the need for a structured collaborative framework to improve access and guidance for Saudi-based OFWs pursuing degree equivalency through

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ETEEAP. The proposed framework serves as a strategic model for CHED, embassies, OWWA, and HEIs to enhance operational efficiency and ensure equitable access to higher education opportunities for OFWs.

Keywords: ETEEAP, collaborative facilitation, HEI, operationalization, overseas filipino workers, OWWA, philippine embassy

1. Introduction

Access to higher education remains a significant challenge for adult learners worldwide, particularly for those who pursue non-traditional pathways or have accumulated substantial professional experience outside formal academic settings. Globally, the recognition of prior learning (RPL) has emerged as a key strategy to bridge this gap, providing mechanisms through which individuals can translate work experience, training, and informal learning into formal academic credit (Meghnagi & Tuccio, 2022; Raciti, Tham & Dale, 2024). Studies indicate that RPL contributes to increased educational participation, reduced redundancy in learning, and faster credential completion, yet it continues to face operational challenges, including inconsistent institutional practices, limited awareness among learners, and procedural complexity (Andersen & Laugesen, 2007). These challenges underscore the global need for structured facilitation and supportive frameworks that enable adult learners to navigate recognition pathways effectively.

In the Philippine setting, the Expanded Tertiary Education Equivalency and Accreditation Program (ETEEAP), implemented by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), represents the nation's primary policy instrument for RPL. The program allows working adults to earn college degrees by accrediting their knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired through professional experience, non-formal education, and informal learning (CHED, 2021). ETEEAP aligns with international trends in lifelong learning and flexible higher education access, offering an alternative route for adults who did not follow the traditional four-year degree path. According to Dela Cruz (2025), ETEEAP provides a progressive mechanism to recognize adult learning, yet its implementation across deputized higher education institutions (HEIs) exhibits variability in terms of assessment rigor, institutional support, and transparency. Such gaps limit the program's effectiveness, particularly for learners operating remotely or under challenging circumstances.

A population for whom ETEEAP is highly relevant but under-researched is Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Globally, migrant workers face barriers to continuing education due to geographic isolation from educational institutions, documentation requirements, language differences, and limited access to guidance. In the case of Filipino OFWs, these challenges are compounded by employment constraints, contractual limitations, and time zone differences, which hinder timely

communication with home-based institutions. Research on adult learning in diaspora contexts emphasizes the importance of tailored support mechanisms, such as orientation, mentoring, and digital facilitation, to improve accessibility and completion rates. Despite the clear policy framework provided by ETEEAP, Saudi-based OFWs — one of the largest migrant worker populations — often have trouble in understanding program requirements, compiling documentation, and coordinating with HEIs and regulatory authorities.

At the national level, the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) report for the Philippines recognizes the importance of recognition, validation, and accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning to enhance educational mobility and workforce readiness (ASEAN, 2016). However, the report also highlights that the implementation of such frameworks for migrant populations remains limited. The lack of structured coordination between Philippine Embassies, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), and accredited HEIs contributes to fragmented support, inconsistent guidance, and delays in credential verification for OFWs pursuing ETEEAP. These operational gaps create a mismatch between the program's intended accessibility and the practical realities of overseas learners. Within this context, this study focuses on Saudi-based OFWs to examine the operational challenges they face in accessing ETEEAP. Data on awareness, documentation difficulties, and procedural navigation were collected through surveys and focus group discussions to identify patterns of need and bottlenecks in current processes. Building on these findings, the study proposes a collaborative facilitation framework designed to coordinate the roles of Philippine Embassies, OWWA offices, and accredited HEIs. The proposed framework is intended to provide structured guidance, streamline documentation verification, improve communication channels, and enhance program accessibility for OFWs operating remotely.

This study is significant in two ways. Academically, it contributes to the literature on RPL, adult learning, and higher education accessibility by highlighting the unique challenges of learners in diaspora contexts. In a practical sense, it offers a strategic model for ETEEAP operationalization that can improve equity, consistency, and efficiency in program delivery for Saudi-based OFWs. Unlike previous studies that examined ETEEAP broadly, this research specifically addresses the overseas operational context and proposes an actionable framework to address gaps in coordination, guidance, and institutional support.

Thus, this study was conducted to assess the operational challenges experienced by Saudi-based OFWs in accessing ETEEAP and to develop a collaborative facilitation framework linking Philippine Embassies, OWWA offices, and accredited HEIs. By doing so, it aims to enhance program operationalization, support lifelong learning among migrant workers, and contribute both to policy refinement and to the broader discourse on adult education accessibility at the global and local levels.

2. Methodology

This study used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to understand the operational challenges faced by Saudi-based Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in accessing the Expanded Tertiary Education Equivalency and Accreditation Program (ETEEAP).

The study population comprised 150 Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) based in various regions of Saudi Arabia who were either prospective or current applicants of the Expanded Tertiary Education Equivalency and Accreditation Program (ETEEAP). Participants were identified through Filipino community organizations, OWWA member groups, and online embassy-affiliated networks. The group included both male and female respondents employed in diverse sectors such as education, healthcare, engineering, and administrative services.

For the qualitative phase, a purposive sampling technique was used to select 20 participants for the focus group discussions (FGDs). Selection criteria included at least five years of relevant work experience, expressed interest in ETEEAP participation, and active involvement in Filipino community or embassy-led activities. Among these participants, ten represented individuals with prior attempts or inquiries regarding ETEEAP enrollment, while the remaining ten were potential applicants seeking information or assistance.

This sampling approach ensured a balanced representation of perspectives, capturing both experienced and prospective participants' insights on the challenges, expectations, and potential improvements in ETEEAP operationalization through Philippine Embassies and OWWA offices in Saudi Arabia.

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative instruments to gather data on the operationalization of the Expanded Tertiary Education Equivalency and Accreditation Program (ETEEAP) for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Saudi Arabia. A structured survey questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data on participants' profiles, awareness of ETEEAP, and perceived challenges in program access. To strengthen construct validity, the questionnaire was supplemented with an adapted Perceived Educational Barriers Scale (PEBS), a validated instrument widely used in adult education research to measure institutional, situational, and personal barriers to educational access, and was pilot-tested among 20 OFWs to ensure reliability and clarity. For the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview guide was utilized during focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore participants' lived experiences, barriers, and suggestions for program improvement. Sessions were conducted online with all data recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Together, these instruments provided both numerical and narrative insights that informed the development of the proposed Collaborative Facilitation Framework for ETEEAP in Saudi Arabia.

The study strictly adhered to established ethical research standards, ensuring informed consent by clearly explaining the study's purpose and procedures to all participants and securing digital consent forms prior to participation, while also

emphasizing their right to withdraw at any stage without any obligation; confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all personal information and storing collected data securely, with access limited solely to the researcher; participation of OFWs in both the survey and FGDs was entirely voluntary, with no financial or material inducements offered; and academic integrity was upheld through proper citation and acknowledgment of all references, instruments, and materials to ensure scholarly transparency and avoid any form of plagiarism.

Quantitative data from the online survey were encoded and analyzed using SPSS version 22, employing descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores to summarize participants' profiles, levels of awareness, and perceived operational challenges in ETEEAP; levels of awareness and accessibility were further categorized using a scale adapted for program evaluation. Meanwhile, qualitative data from focus group discussions (FGDs) and observational notes were examined through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved coding recurring patterns, identifying key themes, and interpreting participants' insights, with emergent themes including program accessibility, inter-agency coordination, documentation difficulties, and participant engagement. The findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses were then triangulated to provide a comprehensive understanding of ETEEAP operational challenges and to assess the feasibility of the proposed Collaborative Facilitation Framework, enabling the researcher to validate statistical trends against participants' lived experiences while ensuring both depth and credibility in the interpretation of results.

3. Results

3.1. Awareness and Operational Challenges of ETEEAP Implementation

The study surveyed 150 Saudi-based OFWs to explore their awareness, access, and challenges regarding ETEEAP. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 22 for descriptive statistics, while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative responses.

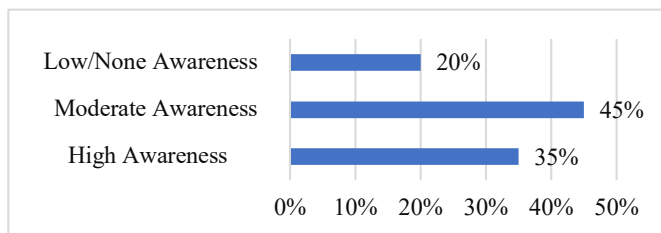


Figure 1. Awareness of ETEEAP among Saudi-Based OFWs.

The graph in Figure 1 shows that only 35% of respondents had high awareness of ETEEAP, while nearly two-thirds had moderate to low awareness. This indicates a gap in information dissemination.

Table 1. Operational challenges identified from survey responses.

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Documentation and verification	112	74.7%
Limited guidance and support	98	65.3%
Coordination gaps between agencies	85	56.7%
Time constraints due to employment	72	48%

Note: Percentages total more than 100% due to multiple-response options.

The table highlights that ‘documentation and verification’ is the most pressing challenge, followed by limited guidance and coordination gaps. These findings resonate with global studies on RPL implementation emphasizing the need for structured, stakeholder-supported facilitation mechanisms.

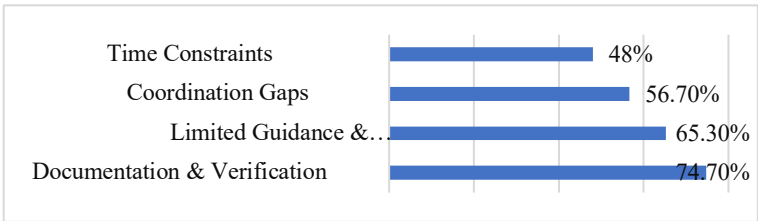


Figure 2. Distribution of Operational Challenges among OFWs.

This visual representation shows that procedural and coordination issues are systemic, supporting the Systems Theory perspective that misaligned subsystems hinder program efficiency.

Participants in the FGDs expressed strong support for a proposed Collaborative Facilitation Framework, highlighting the need for dedicated focal officers at embassies and OWWA offices, streamlined online systems for document submission and status tracking, and the provision of webinars and orientations to better guide OFWs through the ETEEAP process.

The inferential analysis reveals that Employment Sector is a significant predictor of the types of operational challenges faced ($p < 0.05$), with workers in construction & technical industry experiencing more difficulty in securing authenticated work records compared to those in formal healthcare or education. Furthermore, the significant correlation between Years of Experience and Awareness suggests that ETEEAP outreach is currently reaching more seasoned professionals, while newer migrant workers remain underserved. These findings justify the need for the Collaborative Facilitation Framework to target specific vulnerable subgroups.

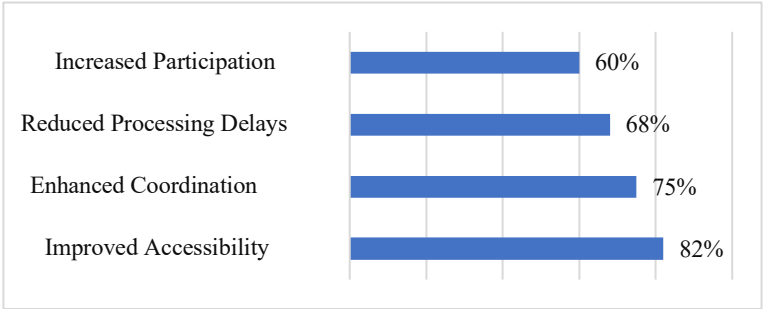


Figure 3. OFWs’ Perceived Benefits of Collaborative Facilitation

Table 2. Inferential analysis of demographic factors and operational challenges.

Variable Comparison	Statistical Test	Value (p-value)	Interpretation
Employment Sector vs. Documentation Difficulty	Chi-Square (X2)	$p < 0.05$	Significant: OFWs in construction & technical sectors reported higher documentation barriers than those in education.
Years of Experience vs. Program Awareness	Pearson Correlation (r)	$r = 0.42, p < 0.01$	Moderate Positive Correlation: More years of experience significantly correlate with higher awareness of RPL programs.
Gender vs. Perceived Guidance Support	Independent T-test (t)	56.7%	Non-Significant: Both male and female OFWs reported similar levels of difficulty in receiving guidance.

Respondents indicated that these strategies would significantly reduce confusion, improve engagement, and increase program uptake, aligning with Collaborative Governance Theory. The data reveal that Saudi-based OFWs face limited awareness, procedural barriers, and fragmented inter-agency coordination, all of which restrict ETEEAP accessibility. These findings support prior studies on RPL and adult education, emphasizing the importance of structured guidance, stakeholder coordination, and system-based processes.

3.2. Qualitative Themes and Narrative Evidence

The thematic analysis of the FGDs with 20 Saudi-based OFWs revealed three dominant themes that explain the high percentage of operational challenges reported in the survey:

Theme 1: Fragmented Support and Lack of Synergy

Participants highlighted a significant gap in coordination between the different agencies involved in the ETEEAP process. One participant (a construction supervisor in Riyadh) remarked:

"I reached out to the Embassy for my work records, but they told me to contact OWWA, and OWWA told me to check directly with the university in Manila. It felt like I was being passed around because nobody had a clear guide on how ETEEAP works for those of us already here in Saudi."

Theme 2: Limited Accessibility to Information

While general awareness exists, participants noted that the specifics of the program are hard to find. A female administrative worker in Jeddah shared:

"We hear about ETEEAP on Facebook, but when you look for a list of requirements, the information seems not fully clear to us, and we have some questions for clarifications. The digital portals of the HEIs are often not optimized for us to upload documents from abroad, which makes the initial step very discouraging."

Theme 3: Delayed Feedback and Communication Constraints

The time difference and the lack of a dedicated overseas liaison were cited as major frustrations. A healthcare worker in Tabuk stated:

"The biggest issue is the silence. You submit your documents and wait for weeks. By the time, the university replies with a question about your credentials, your work schedule has changed, and you miss the window to respond. A dedicated officer at the Embassy would bridge this gap."

3.3 The Proposed Collaborative Facilitation Framework (Matrix)

The proposed Collaborative Facilitation Framework (Table 3) addresses these challenges by establishing clear roles for embassies, OWWA, and HEIs, supported by digital tools and structured communication; participants perceived that such a framework would improve accessibility and awareness of ETEEAP, reduce procedural delays and errors, and increase participation and engagement among OFWs pursuing degree equivalency. This study demonstrates that strategically coordinated interventions, informed by stakeholder experiences, can enhance program operationalization. While not yet implemented, the framework provides a foundation

Table 3. Collaborative facilitation framework for ETEEAP operationalization.

Agency	Primary Role	Key Responsibilities	Addressed Bottleneck
Philippine Embassy	Logistical & Legal Facilitator	- Authentication of local Saudi employment records and certificates. - Hosting ETEEAP orientation via "Kapihan" or community town halls. - Verification of the applicant's legal status in the host country.	Documentation & Verification (74.7%)
OWWA (Saudi Offices)	Student Support & Welfare	- Appointment of a dedicated ETEEAP Focal Officer for OFWs. - Provision of digital guidance kits and application status tracking. - Coordinating scholarship/financial aid inquiries for ETEEAP applicants.	Limited Guidance & Support (65.3%)
Accredited HEIs	Academic & Assessment Body	- Conducting virtual competency assessments and interviews. - Streamlined digital submission portal for overseas applicants. - Timely feedback loops for credit transfer and equivalency results.	Coordination Gaps (56.7%)
Integrated Digital Portal	Cross-Agency Tool	- Shared database for real-time document verification. - Centralized communication hub for the applicant, OWWA, and the HEI.	Time constraints due to employment (48%)

for future pilot testing, continuous feedback, and iterative improvements to support Saudi-based OFWs.

4. Discussion

This study directly addressed the research question on how the operationalization of ETEEAP can be improved for Saudi-based OFWs through Philippine Embassies and OWWA, and the findings indicate that the primary constraint lies not in the policy itself but in its implementation. Overall results reveal low to moderate awareness, with only 35% of respondents reporting high awareness, alongside significant operational barriers—particularly in documentation and verification (74.7%), limited guidance (65.3%), coordination gaps (56.7%), and time constraints (48%)—suggesting that access issues are systemic and institutional rather than individual.

These findings support the hypothesis that a coordinated, multi-agency facilitation framework would enhance ETEEAP accessibility and participation, as OFWs' limited engagement appears largely driven by fragmented support systems and insufficient information dissemination. Consistent with Dilla and Ibarra (2022), geographic distance and weak institutional outreach contribute to limited awareness of recognition-of-prior-learning programs, while the challenges identified also align with Jackson and Bridgstock (2020), who noted that RPL systems often fail when administrative processes are complex and inadequately supported. However, unlike studies reporting stronger institutional integration in overseas education services, this study highlights more pronounced fragmentation among embassies, OWWA, and HEIs, underscoring context-specific inefficiencies in the Saudi OFW setting. These results reinforce Systems Theory (Senge, 2006) and Collaborative Governance Theory (Ansell & Gash, 2008), emphasizing that program effectiveness depends on aligned and cooperative institutional subsystems. Practically, the findings point to the need for a Collaborative Facilitation Framework that strengthens inter-agency coordination, introduces digital document systems, and provides structured guidance to improve accessibility and reduce delays in ETEEAP processing, as perceived by participants.

Nevertheless, the study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data from 150 respondents and qualitative FGDs, which may introduce response bias and limit generalizability beyond Saudi-based OFWs. Future research should pilot-test the proposed framework and conduct comparative studies across different host countries to validate its effectiveness. Overall, the study concludes that improving ETEEAP accessibility requires an integrated, technology-supported, and multi-agency coordinated approach to better serve OFWs seeking academic equivalency.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that Saudi-based Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) face significant operational challenges in accessing the Expanded Tertiary Education Equivalency and Accreditation Program

(ETEEAP). The study revealed persistent barriers related to limited awareness of program requirements, difficulties in documentation, fragmented guidance, and communication delays with higher education institutions. These challenges highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions that address both logistical and procedural gaps to ensure equitable access to degree equivalency for OFWs.

The findings further indicate that the lack of structured support from key institutions—namely, Philippine Embassies, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), and accredited higher education institutions—compounds the difficulties experienced by OFWs. This underscores the importance of a coordinated and systematic approach to operationalizing ETEEAP for learners abroad. The study's proposed collaborative facilitation framework, which clearly defines the roles of embassies, OWWA, and HEIs, offers a practical and strategic solution to bridge these gaps. By providing structured orientation, guidance on document verification, and improved communication channels, the framework aims to enhance the accessibility, consistency, and efficiency of ETEEAP for Saudi-based OFWs.

Moreover, the study highlights that operational interventions must go beyond policy and procedural adjustments. They should actively consider the contextual realities of migrant learners, including geographic separation, employment constraints, and limited access to institutional support. A facilitation framework that integrates these considerations can foster greater engagement, reduce delays, and build OFWs' confidence in navigating the program.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the critical need for a holistic and collaborative approach to ETEEAP operationalization. By implementing the proposed facilitation framework, policymakers and institutions can ensure that Saudi-based OFWs are not only informed and guided but also supported throughout the equivalency process. Such an approach can significantly improve program uptake, contribute to lifelong learning, and enhance the professional and personal development opportunities of Filipino migrant workers abroad.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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