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IMPACT OF SPECIAL TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM (STEP) OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY (TESDA): INPUT TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TRACKING SYSTEM

FARRAH R. BUENSALIDO, MAIED-HE

Capiz, State University, Roxas City, Philippines

Abstract: This study explored the impact of the Special Training for Employment Program (STEP) implemented by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) on the graduates of Dumalag Vocational Technical School (DVTS) from 2021 to 2023. Employing the explanatory sequential design, this study provided a comprehensive understanding of the program's impact. The descriptive method was used for the quantitative aspect, while a phenomenological approach was applied to gather and analyze qualitative data through in-depth interview. The participants included 75 STEP graduates selected using total population sampling, all of whom met the criteria of having completed the program within the specified timeframe. The frequency, percentage, and the mean were the statistical tools used to analyze and interpret the gathered data. Findings revealed that the majority of respondents were female, aged between 26 to 35 years old, with most belonging to low-income households earning between ₱5,001 to ₱10,000 monthly. A significant number were college graduates, primarily employed in the private sector, and many came from farming or fishing backgrounds. The quantitative data indicated that the overall impact of STEP was rated "High," with productivity scoring the highest among measured variables. Qualitative analysis identified six key themes reflecting the skills developed through the program: knowledge generation, skill development, business startup, honing skills, income generation, and emotional growth. Benefits highlighted by the graduates included hands-on experience, emotional empowerment, financial independence, and enhanced job security. Despite these positive outcomes, the study also uncovered several challenges, including the lack of tools and materials during training, high startup costs, inadequate publicity of the program, and difficulties in learning technical skills. The study concludes that STEP plays a crucial role in empowering individuals through technical and vocational education, especially those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. It recommends enhanced resource allocation, expanded support services, and strengthened partnerships to further improve the program's reach, effectiveness, and long-term impact on graduates' lives.

Keywords: STEP Program, Technical-Vocational Education, Graduate Outcomes

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, the government's support in nurturing the citizen's skills and livelihood development is evident in the implementation of various programs and activities by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA). Livelihood Program was created in response to the need for economic empowerment in the Philippines, a country with a rich cultural diversity and various customs. This project, which was inspired by a desire to improve the lives of those in the community, aims to increase productivity and employability by providing chances for training and vital skills. This program is a tribute to the transforming potential of education and skill development in generating sustainable growth and prosperity, serving as a light of hope for countless people.

The Special Training for Employment Program (STEP) is a training initiative established by the Philippines' Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA). In 2014, STEP was initiated to increase employability and productivity by providing skills and training opportunities in local communities. Beneficiaries of the programmed receive free short-term training in entrepreneurial, self-employment and service-oriented activities, as well as free competency

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assessments. Applicants are required to be Filipino nationals and over the age of 15. The duration of the training depends on the course taken, ranging from 100 to 1000+ hours. The courses offered focus primarily on the following sectors: agriculture and fishery; automotive and land transport; heating, ventilation, air-condition and refrigeration; construction; visual arts; electronics; furnishing and fixtures; garments; health, social and other community development services; and metals and engineering. Aside from being given a daily allowance of PhP60 (USD3), beneficiaries of STEP received starter toolkits tailored to each field of study, to further assist them in finding jobs or starting their own businesses.

In 2015, approximately 21,000 students graduated from the programmed. In 2019, the number of graduates peaked at 75,000. During the pandemic, this figure has reduced significantly. However, TESDA continues to distribute toolkits to graduates to help them set their careers in motion.

As it stands, most STEP training centres are in central provinces and urban areas. In order to increase accessibility among grassroots individuals (a key target group), STEP should consider constructing a greater number of training centres in rural areas. The programme could also consider collaborating with Balik Probinsya, a socioeconomic programme by the Philippines' Government that aims to provide new opportunities to people following the COVID-19 pandemic by reversing migration into the country's capital, and helping to enhance the quality of life in rural areas. Individuals returning to their home provinces could be enrolled into STEP training programmes matching the needs of their provinces.

With the STEP already existing as one of TESDA's flagship program, recipients from the province of Capiz are expected to have significantly benefitted from this initiative. As it is, Capiznons have found the STEP as a pivotal force in uplifting grassroots communities by fostering skill development and empowerment. By focusing on sectors crucial to the community's economic landscape, such as agriculture, entrepreneurship, and technology, STEP ensures that training outcomes directly contribute to local development. Moreover, the program promotes inclusivity by reaching out to marginalized groups in the province of Capiz, empowering them with the tools needed to break the cycle of poverty. Overall, TESDA's STEP stands as a beacon of hope, fostering self-reliance and community resilience across the diverse and vibrant tapestry of the Philippines. It is in this context that the researcher would like to justify the conduct of this study.

II. METHODOLOGY

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the impact of Special Training for Employment Program (STEP) of Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) among graduates of Dumalag Vocational Technical School (DVTS).

This study used the mixed methods of research using explanatory sequential design to gather information. In using this method, the researcher employed the descriptive approach as the quantitative data gathering method. Meanwhile, for the qualitative data gathering method, the phenomenological research approach was used.

The descriptive research method is a systematic approach that seeks to describe and analyze the characteristics, behaviors, or phenomena of a specific subject or group. It focuses on observing and recording existing conditions, relationships, and patterns without attempting to establish cause and effect or manipulate variables. Collecting data through techniques such as surveys, interviews, observations, and document analysis is a part of descriptive research. Using statistical analysis to summarize and interpret the data, researchers strive to provide a precise and in-depth description of the topic of study. This technique is frequently employed in the social sciences, psychology, education, and other disciplines where researchers seek insights into the characteristics, attitudes, opinions, behaviors, or trends of a particular population or phenomenon. The descriptive method aids in the organization and summarization of data, the identification of patterns, and the provision of a foundation for future research or investigations.

According to Privitera and Wallace (2011) the descriptive method is used further analyze the quality and accuracy of the study objectives. Surveys can be useful when a researcher wants data on phenomena that cannot be directly observed. Surveys are extensively conducted in library and information science to assess attitudes and characteristics of a wide range of subjects. On the other hand, correlation research investigates relationships between two or more sets of data. This design likewise helps determine the extent of which different variables are related to each other.

Data Gathering Procedure

To conduct the study, the researcher sought the approval of the Dean of the College of Education to conduct the study

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and then she sought the permission of the Vocational School Administrator of the DVTS.

After the approval of the letter, the researcher personally administered the questionnaire with complete confidentiality using face to face method with the STEP graduates. The questionnaire was processed, encoded, analyzed, and interpreted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Furthermore, the researcher invited selected STEP for an in-depth wherein they discussed the challenges that they have encountered in the implementation of STEP, how these challenges were overcome, and how the STEP benefitted the graduates. To obtain nuanced responses, the respondent inviteed 5-6 STEP beneficiaries/graduates and 5-6 STEP trainers to get various perspectives.

Statistical Tools

The frequency, percentage, and the mean were the statistical tools used to analyze and interpret the gathered data.

The profile of the respondents in terms of sex, age, monthly family income, highest educational attainment, employment status, and type of beneficiary were determined through frequency and percentage. Frequency aids in analyzing the nominal and ordinal data. The percentage was computed by dividing the number of responses per category by the total number of cases or respondents, and then multiplying the results by 100.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Profile of the Graduate-Participants

Table 1 enumerates the profile of the graduate-respondents in terms of sex, age, monthly family income, highest educational attainment, employment status, and type of beneficiary. Statistics revealed that out 75 respondents, the females were predominant (90.70%) in terms of sex. When grouped according to age, twenty-eight of them (37.30%) had ages between 26 to 35 years old. Fifty-two of them (69.30%) had a monthly family income of ₱5,001.00 to ₱10,000.00. Thirty of them (40.00%) were college graduate, most of them (64.00%) were employed-private in terms of their employment status, and thirty-four of them (45.30%) were farmers and fisherman.

These findings imply that the graduate-respondents' socioeconomic background significantly influences their educational and professional trajectories. The predominance of female respondents (90.70%) suggests that women may have greater participation in educational pursuits or a higher willingness to engage in studies of this nature. The majority age group (26 to 35 years old) indicates that most respondents are in their early to mid-career stage, likely balancing work and personal responsibilities. Additionally, the fact that 69.30% of them have a monthly family income ranging from ₱5,001.00 to ₱10,000.00 highlights financial constraints that may affect their access to further education and career growth.

While 40.00% were college graduates, the data suggest that a considerable number may not have pursued higher studies beyond the undergraduate level.

Table 1. Profile of the Graduate-Respondents.

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Sex		
Male	7	9.30
Female	68	90.70
Total	75	100
Age		
18 to 25 years old	22	29.30
26 to 35 years old	28	37.30
36 to 45 years old	16	21.30
46 to 55 years old	7	9.30
56 years old and above	2	2.70
Total	75	100
Monthly Family Income		
Below ₱5,000.00	1	1.30
₱5,001.00-₱10,000.00	52	69.30
	21	28.00

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₱10,001.00-₱15,000.00	1	1.30
₱15,001.00-₱20,000.00	75	100
Above ₱20,001.00		
Total		
Highest Educational Attainment		
Senior High School	17	22.70
High School Graduate	25	33.30
College Graduate	30	40.00
College Undergraduate	3	4.00
Total	75	100
Employment Status		
Employed-Private	48	64.00
With Own Business	27	36.00
Total	75	100
Type of Beneficiary		
Displaced Worker	2	2.70
Industry Worker/Wage Earner	16	21.30
Informal Worker	20	26.70
OFW Dependent	2	2.70
Self-Employed OFW	1	1.30
Farmers/Fisherman	34	45.30
Total	75	100

The employment status distribution, where 64.00% work in the private sector, signifies a dependence on private job opportunities rather than government or entrepreneurial ventures. Furthermore, with 45.30% of respondents engaged in farming and fishing, it is evident that many come from agricultural or rural backgrounds, which could influence their economic stability and career aspirations. Overall, these findings emphasize the role of socioeconomic conditions in shaping educational attainment, employment opportunities, and future aspirations.

This observation is supported by the study conducted by Correa et al. (2019), which found that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds in Chile achieved significantly better academic results and higher earnings in their early careers, even when controlling for prior academic performance.

Level Of Impact Of Special Training For Employment Program As A Whole

When all the 75 participants were taken as a whole group, Table 2 discloses that the grand mean score on the level of impact of special training for employment program as a whole was 3.90. Result further implied that the special training for employment program had a “High” level of impact as perceived by the respondents.

These findings imply that the special training for employment program had a significant and positive impact on the respondents, as indicated by the grand mean score of 3.90, which falls within the "High" level of impact. This suggests that the program was effective in enhancing the respondents' skills, employability, and overall readiness for the workforce. The high level of perceived impact may indicate that the training provided relevant knowledge and practical competencies that align with the demands of the job market.

These findings affirmed the study conducted by Wolter and Ryan (2011) which stated that individuals who undergo vocational training tend to have higher rates of job placement and shorter unemployment durations than non-participants. Moreover, this also supported the findings of a study conducted by Lerman (2014) that the participation in vocational training significantly enhances individuals' job prospects and income, particularly for those facing barriers to finding employment or lacking specific skills.

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Table 2. Level of Impact of Special Training for Employment Programs a Whole.

Variables	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Employability	3.81	High
Economic Upliftment	3.84	High
Community Development	3.65	High
Productivity	4.11	High
Social Inclusion	4.09	High
Grand Mean	3.90	High

Level of Impact of Special Training for Employment Program in Terms of Employability

Legend: 4.21-5.00 = *Very High*; 3.41-4.20 = *High*; 2.61-3.40 = *Average*; 1.81-2.60 = *Low*; 1.00-1.80 = *Very Low*

Table 4 reveals the level of impact of special training for employment programin terms of employability. Result showed that the total mean score of 3.81 further implied that the special training for employment program in terms of employability had a “High” level of impact as perceived by the respondents. However, there a lowest mean score of 1.37 which was interpreted as “Very Low” level of impact and this was on the statement “My employers have negative feedback regarding the skills and competencies I acquired from TESDA STEP”. On the other hand, there was a highest mean score of 4.75 which was interpreted as “Very High” level of impact and this was on the statement “I am currently employed, either full-time, part-time, or on a contractual basis”.

These findings imply that the special training for employment program had a generally positive impact on the employability of the respondents, as reflected by the total mean score of 3.81, which falls within the "High" level of impact. This suggests that the program effectively enhanced the participants' job prospects, equipping them with skills that facilitated their entry or retention in the workforce. The highest mean score of 4.75 on the statement “I am currently employed, either full-time, part-time, or on a contractual basis” further reinforces the program’s success in improving employment opportunities for its graduates.

However, the lowest mean score of 1.37 on the statement “My employers have negative feedback regarding the skills and competencies I acquired from TESDA STEP” suggests that, while the program was beneficial overall, some respondents may have faced challenges in meeting employer expectations. This indicates the need for continuous curriculum assessment and enhancement to ensure that the skills imparted align with industry standards and employer demands.

Furthermore, this indicates that the respondents strongly disagreed with the idea that their employers had negative feedback about the skills and competencies they acquired from the TESDA STEP program. This suggests that the training was generally well-regarded by employers, reinforcing the program's positive impact on employability.

These findings affirmed the study of Ignacio & Tabu (2019), which explored the impact of TESDA's skills training programs on employability. Their research highlighted that graduate of TESDA's vocational courses, including persons with disabilities (PWDs), were able to secure employment, even if not on a permanent basis. The study also emphasized that the hands-on training provided by TESDA played a crucial role in equipping trainees with practical skills, aligning with the respondents' perception in the current study that the special training for employment program had a "High" level of impact on their employability (Ignacio & Tabu, 2019).

Table 3. Level of Impact of Special Training for Employment Program in Terms of Employability.

Statement	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. I am currently employed, either full-time, part-time, or on a contractual basis.	4.75	Very High
2. The job I am currently holding is related to the skills I acquired during the TESDA STEP training.	4.52	Very High
3. It took me a specific amount of time to find employment after completing the STEP training.	4.19	High
4. My current job position and primary responsibilities align with my training from TESDA STEP.	4.47	Very High

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5. I rarely use the skills learned from TESDA STEP in my current job.	3.92	High
6. The STEP training has led to an increase in my salary or benefits compared to my previous employment.	4.51	Very High
7. I am satisfied with my current job in terms of role, responsibilities, work environment, and growth opportunities.	4.56	Very High
8. I have received promotions or career advancement opportunities since completing the STEP training.	4.27	Very High
9. I have pursued further education or training after completing TESDA STEP to enhance my employability.	1.56	Very Low
10. My employers have negative feedback regarding the skills and competencies I acquired from TESDA STEP.	1.37	Very Low
Total Mean	3.81	High

Legend: 4.21-5.00 = *Very High*; 3.41-4.20 = *High*; 2.61-3.40 = *Average*; 1.81-2.60 = *Low*; 1.

However, Ignacio & Tabu (2019) also noted certain challenges faced by trainees, particularly in communication and employer expectations, which parallel the current study's finding of a "Very Low" impact regarding employer feedback on TESDA-acquired skills. These similarities reinforce the need for continuous curriculum improvements to ensure that training programs fully meet industry demands (Ignacio & Tabu, 2019).

Level of Impact of Special Training for Employment Program in Terms of Economic Upliftment

Table 4 shows the level of impact of special training for employment program in terms of economic upliftment. Result showed that the total mean score of 3.84 further implied that the special training for employment program in terms of economic upliftment had a "High" level of impact as perceived by the respondents.

There was a highest mean score of 4.55 which was interpreted as "Very High" level of impact and this was on the statement "I am able to contribute more economically to my community due to the skills and opportunities provided by the STEP training".

These findings imply that the special training for employment program had a significant positive impact on the economic upliftment of the respondents, as indicated by the total mean score of 3.84, which falls within the "High" level of impact. This suggests that the training program provided participants with skills and opportunities that enhanced their financial stability and economic participation. The highest mean score of 4.55 on the statement "I am able to contribute more economically to my community due to the skills and opportunities provided by the STEP training" reinforces the idea that the program not only benefited individuals but also had a broader impact on community development. However, the lowest mean score of 1.23 on the statement "My income did not increase despite my completion of the STEP training" indicates that some respondents did not experience direct financial growth after completing the program. This disparity suggests that while the training improved employment opportunities, actual income growth may depend on other factors such as job availability, industry demand, and individual career paths.

However, there a lowest mean score of 1.23 which was interpreted as "Very Low" level of impact and this was on the statement "My income did not increase despite my completion of the STEP training income did not increase despite my completion of the program". This suggests that respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that their income did not increase after completing the STEP training. This implies that most beneficiaries experienced a positive change in income as a result of the program.

These findings affirmed the study of Dumaua-Cabauatan, Calizo, Quimba, & Pacio (2018), which highlighted the role of TESDA's technical and vocational training programs in improving economic conditions by equipping individuals with skills that enhance their employability. Their study emphasized that technical training programs contribute to economic upliftment by providing individuals with opportunities to secure jobs or start their own businesses. This aligns with the current study's finding that the STEP training enabled respondents to contribute more economically to their communities, as reflected in the highest mean score of 4.55 (Dumaua-Cabauatan, Calizo, Quimba, & Pacio, 2018).

However, Dumaua-Cabauatan et al. (2018) also noted that while TESDA training programs expand access to skills development, financial stability is not always guaranteed, as other external factors such as economic conditions, job market saturation, and availability of entrepreneurial support also influence income growth. This supports the current study's finding that some respondents did not experience an increase in income despite completing the training, as reflected in the lowest mean score of 1.23. These parallels suggest that while training programs are valuable in providing

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employment opportunities, additional measures such as job placement assistance and industry collaboration may be necessary to ensure long-term financial benefits for graduates (Dumaua-Cabauatan, Calizo, Quimba, & Pacio, 2018).

Table 4. Level of Impact of Special Training for Employment Program in Terms of Economic Upliftment.

Statement	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. My income did not increase despite my completion of the STEP training income did not increase despite my completion of the M	1.23	Very Low
2. I feel more financially stable and secure after undergoing the STEP training.	4.37	Very High
3. I am able to save more money or make investments due to the skills and job opportunities provided by the STEP training.	4.39	Very High
4. I have been able to reduce my debts since completing the STEP training.	4.39	Very High
5. My standard of living has improved as a result of the employment opportunities and income gained from the STEP training.	4.40	Very High
6. I am better able to support my family financially after completing the STEP training.	4.40	Very High
7. I have greater access to resources and opportunities that contribute to my economic well-being since completing the STEP training.	4.37	Very High
8. I did not start or expand my own business as a result of the skills learned from the STEP training.	1.85	Low
9. I feel more secure in my job and future employment prospects after completing the STEP training.	4.41	Very High
10. I am able to contribute more economically to my community due to the skills and opportunities provided by the STEP training.	4.55	Very High
Total Mean	3.84	High

Legend: 4.21-5.00 = Very High; 3.41-4.20 = High; 2.61-3.40 = Average; 1.81-2.60 = Low; 1.00-1.80 = Very Low Competency

Level of Impact of Special Training for Employment Program in Terms of Community Development

Table 5 exposes the level of impact of special training for employment program in terms of community development. Result showed that the total mean score of 3.65 further implied that the special training for employment program in terms of community development had a “High” level of impact as perceived by the respondents. However, there a lowest mean score of 2.01 which was interpreted as “Low” level of impact and this was on the statement “I have not yet shared the skills and knowledge I gained from STEP training with other members of my community”.

These findings imply that the special training for employment program had a substantial positive impact on community development, as reflected in the total mean score of 3.65, which falls within the "High" level of impact. This suggests that the program not only enhanced the skills and employability of its participants but also contributed to the overall growth and development of their communities. The training equipped individuals with valuable competencies that enabled them to become more productive members of society, potentially fostering local economic growth and social empowerment.

However, the lowest mean score of 2.01 on the statement “I have not yet shared the skills and knowledge I gained from STEP training with other members of my community” indicates that some respondents have yet to actively disseminate their acquired knowledge. This implies a “Low” level of impact, suggesting that while some participants may not have engaged in community sharing, the majority are likely contributing their skills in meaningful ways beyond personal gain. Furthermore, this reflects the need to encourage more community-based knowledge transfer to maximize the broader social impact of the STEP training program.

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These findings affirmed the study of TESDA Circular No. 3 (2018), which emphasized that the Special Training for Employment Program (STEP) plays a crucial role in community development by equipping individuals with relevant skills that enhance employability and productivity. The circular highlighted that STEP is designed not only to

Table 5. Level of Impact of Special Training for Employment Program in Terms of Community Development.

Statement	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. I am more actively involved in community activities and initiatives since completing the STEP training.	3.96	High
2. I participate in volunteer work or community service more frequently after completing the STEP training.	3.84	High
3. I have taken on leadership roles within my community as a result of the confidence and skills gained from the STEP training.	3.89	High
4. My employment contributes to the local economy and provides services or products that benefit my community.	3.91	High
5. I have not yet shared the skills and knowledge I gained from STEP training with other members of my community	2.01	Low
6. I have initiated or contributed to community projects that address local needs since completing the STEP training.	3.77	High
7. The skills I gained from the STEP training have improved the quality of services or products available in my community.	3.76	High
8. I have developed stronger support networks within my community due to the relationships and connections made during the STEP training.	3.76	High
9. Mentoring or supporting younger members of my community in their personal and professional development as a result of my training experience.	3.83	High
10. Since completing the STEP training, I have gained a deeper awareness of community issues, allowing me to engage more proactively in development efforts.	3.81	High
Total Mean	3.65	High

Legend: 4.21-5.00 = *Very High*; 3.41-4.20 = *High*; 2.61-3.40 = *Average*; 1.81-2.60 = *Low*; 1.00-1.80 = *Very Low*

Competency

address individual career advancement but also to foster economic and social growth within communities. This aligns with the current study's finding that the program had a "High" level of impact on community development, as reflected in the total mean score of 3.65, suggesting that respondents acknowledged the broader benefits of STEP in their localities (TESDA Circular No. 3, 2018).

However, TESDA Circular No. 3 (2018) also acknowledged that while STEP aims to strengthen community engagement, the extent to which beneficiaries share their acquired skills with others may vary. Some individuals may focus more on personal career growth rather than actively transferring their knowledge to other community members. This supports the current study's finding that some respondents had a "Low" level of impact in terms of sharing their skills, as indicated by the lowest mean score of 2.01. These similarities suggest that while STEP is effective in fostering individual skill development and employment, additional strategies such as structured mentorship programs and community-based training initiatives may be necessary to maximize its impact on knowledge dissemination and community involvement (TESDA Circular No. 3, 2018).

Level of Impact of Special Training for Employment Program in Terms of Productivity

Table 6 discloses the level of impact of special training for employment program in terms of productivity. Result showed that the total mean score of 4.11 further implied that the special training for employment program in terms of productivity had a "High" level of impact as perceived by the respondents. However, there a lowest mean score of 1.32 which was interpreted as "Very Low" level of impact and this was on the statement "My ability to collaborate and work

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effectively within a team has not improved, despite the training I received from STEP.". On the other hand, there was a highest mean score of 4.65 which was interpreted as "Very High" level of impact and this was on the statement "My efficiency in completing tasks has significantly improved since completing the TESDA STEP training".

These findings imply that the special training for employment program had a significant positive impact on the productivity of the respondents, as indicated by the total mean score of 4.11, which falls within the "High" level of impact. This suggests that the training effectively enhanced the participants' efficiency and work performance, equipping them with the necessary skills to complete tasks more effectively. The highest mean score of 4.65 on the statement "My efficiency in completing tasks has significantly improved since completing the TESDA STEP training" further reinforces the idea that the program successfully developed the technical competencies of its beneficiaries, allowing them to perform their job responsibilities with greater precision and speed.

On the other hand, the lowest mean score of 1.32 on the statement "My ability to collaborate and work effectively within a team has not improved, despite the training I received from STEP" indicates that while the training enhanced individual productivity, it may not have sufficiently addressed teamwork and collaboration skills. This implies that although STEP training effectively builds technical competencies, there may be a gap in developing soft skills such as teamwork, which are equally vital for workplace success.

These findings affirmed the study of Ignacio & Tabu (2019), which explored the impact of TESDA's skills training programs on work performance and productivity. Their study found that graduates of TESDA vocational courses demonstrated improved technical competencies and job efficiency, particularly in hands-on professions such as housekeeping and barista services. This aligns with the current study's finding that the STEP training had a "High" level of impact on productivity, as reflected in the total mean score of 4.11, and that respondents acknowledged improvements in their ability to complete tasks efficiently, as shown by the highest mean score of 4.65 (Ignacio & Tabu, 2019).

Table 6. Level of Impact of Special Training for Employment Program in Terms of Productivity.

Statement	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. My efficiency in completing tasks has significantly improved since completing the TESDA STEP training.	4.65	Very High
2. The quality of my work output has increased due to the skills and knowledge gained from the STEP training.	4.47	Very High
3. I am better at managing my time and meeting deadlines as a result of the STEP training.	4.49	Very High
4. I have adopted more effective work techniques and methods since completing the STEP training.	4.33	Very High
5. I can perform a greater variety of tasks and handle more complex responsibilities after completing the STEP training.	4.37	Very High
6. My problem-solving skills have not improved; I still find it hard to address challenges more efficiently in my work.	4.31	Very High
7. I am more innovative and creative in my approach to work tasks since completing the STEP training.	4.44	Very High
8. I can produce a higher volume of work without compromising quality due to the skills acquired from the STEP training.	4.25	Very High
9. My ability to collaborate and work effectively within a team has not improved, despite the training I received from STEP.	1.32	Very Low
10. I am more adaptable to changes and new processes in the workplace since completing the STEP training	4.51	Very High
Total Mean	4.11	High

Legend: 4.21-5.00 = *Very High*; 3.41-4.20 = *High*; 2.61-3.40 = *Average*; 1.81-2.60 = *Low*; 1.00-1.80 = *Very Low*

Competency

However, Ignacio & Tabu (2019) also noted that while TESDA training programs enhanced individual skill development, they did not always emphasize teamwork and collaboration, posing challenges in workplace integration. This supports the current study's finding that some respondents had a "Very Low" level of impact in terms of teamwork and collaboration, as reflected in the lowest mean score of 1.32. These similarities suggest that while STEP effectively

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enhances individual productivity, incorporating more team-based learning activities and interpersonal skills training could further strengthen its impact on workplace adaptability and group dynamics (Ignacio & Tabu, 2019).

Level of Impact of Special Training for Employment Program in Terms of Social Inclusion

Table 7 reveals the level of impact of special training for employment program in terms of social inclusion. Result showed that the total mean score of 4.09 further implied that the special training for employment program in terms of social inclusion had a “High” level of impact as perceived by the respondents. However, there a lowest mean score of 2.19 which was interpreted as “Low” level of impact and this was on the statement “My ability to collaborate and work effectively within a team has not improved, despite the training I received from STEP.”. On the other hand, there was a highest mean score of 4.51 which was interpreted as “Very High” level of impact and this was on the statement “I feel more empowered to engage in social and civic activities and to voice my opinions and concerns in community matters since completing the STEP training”.

These findings imply that the special training for employment program had a significant positive impact on social inclusion, as reflected in the total mean score of 4.09, which falls within the "High" level of impact. This suggests that the training not only enhanced the technical skills of the respondents but also empowered them to actively participate in social and civic engagements. The highest mean score of 4.51 on the statement “I feel more empowered to engage in social and civic activities and to voice my opinions and concerns in community matters since completing the STEP training” reinforces the idea that the program helped boost the confidence and social involvement of its beneficiaries.

However, the lowest mean score of 2.19 on the statement “My ability to collaborate and work effectively within a team has not improved, despite the training I received from STEP” suggests that while the program promoted individual empowerment, it may not have placed enough emphasis on teamwork and interpersonal skills. This indicates the need for more collaborative activities and group-based training approaches to further enhance the social integration and cooperative abilities of the participants. Likewise, while the program promoted individual empowerment, it may not have placed enough emphasis on teamwork and interpersonal skills. This indicates the need to integrate more collaborative activities and group-based training strategies to strengthen participants’ social engagement and cooperative competencies in real-world settings.

These findings affirmed the study of Dumaua-Cabauatan, Calizo, Quimba, & Pacio (2018), which highlighted the role of TESDA training programs in fostering social inclusion by providing individuals with skills that enhance their confidence and ability to participate in community and economic activities. Their study emphasized that TESDA programs, particularly e-learning initiatives, allowed individuals from various backgrounds to access training and become more engaged in their communities. This aligns with the current study’s finding that STEP had a "High" level of impact on social inclusion, as indicated by the total mean score of 4.09. Furthermore, the highest mean score of 4.51, which reflects respondents' increased participation in social and civic engagements, is consistent with the findings of Dumaua-Cabauatan et al. (2018), who noted that technical and vocational training empowers individuals to take an active role in their communities (Dumaua-Cabauatan, Calizo, Quimba, & Pacio, 2018).

Table7. Level of Impact of Special Training for Employment Program in Terms of Social Inclusion.

Statement	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. I feel a greater sense of belonging and acceptance in my community since completing the TESDA STEP training.	4.48	Very High
2. I participate more actively in social and community activities after completing the STEP training.	4.17	High
3. I have greater access to social, educational, and employment opportunities as a result of the STEP training.	4.19	High
4. I experience less discrimination and social exclusion in my personal and professional life since completing the STEP training.	4.12	High
5. I have expanded my social networks and made new connections through the STEP training.	4.32	Very High
6. I receive more support and encouragement from my community since completing the STEP training.	4.32	Very High
7. My cultural awareness and appreciation for diversity have increased as a result of the STEP training.	4.29	Very High

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8. I have become more aware of and advocate for inclusive practices in my workplace and community after completing the STEP training.	4.28	Very High
9. I am less supportive and inclusive of others in my community, especially those from marginalized groups, since completing the STEP training.	2.19	Low
10. I feel more empowered to engage in social and civic activities and to voice my opinions and concerns in community matters since completing the STEP training.	4.51	Very High
Total Mean	4.09	High

Legend: 4.21-5.00 = Very High; 3.41-4.20 = High; 2.61-3.40 = Average; 1.81-2.60 = Low; 1.00-1.80 = Very Low

Competency

Additionally, the study of Ignacio & Tabu (2019) provided further support for these findings, particularly in the aspect of workplace inclusion. Their research found that TESDA training enabled graduates, including persons with disabilities, to integrate into social and economic environments, though challenges in teamwork and collaboration persisted. This is in line with the current study's lowest mean score of 2.19, which suggests that some respondents did not experience improvements in their ability to collaborate and work effectively within a team. These similarities highlight the need for STEP and similar training programs to incorporate more interactive, team-based learning approaches to further enhance social integration and workplace adaptability (Ignacio & Tabu, 2019).

Skills Developed Among the Graduates of STEP

Reflected on Table 8 are the themes extracted from the interview with the STEP graduates. Based on the statements extracted from the respondents regarding the skills developed through the STEP program, several key subthemes were identified. These include knowledge generation, skill development, business startup, honing skills, income generation, and emotional growth. Each of these subthemes reflects the various ways in which individuals acquire knowledge, refine their abilities, achieve financial stability, and experience personal and emotional development.

Theme 1: Knowledge-Generation

In terms of knowledge generation, Respondent 2 shared: "I gained knowledge in baking and pastry-making through the STEP program." This statement highlights the significant role of skill development programs in providing individuals with valuable knowledge in specialized fields. The implication is that access to structured learning opportunities empowers individuals with practical expertise that can be applied in real-world settings, increasing their potential for personal and professional growth. This finding aligns with the conceptual literature on the Special Training for Employment Program (STEP), which emphasizes the program's goal of enhancing employability by equipping individuals with market-driven skills (TESDA Circular No. 3, 2018). Furthermore, Dumaua-Cabauatan, Calizo, Quimba, & Pacio (2018) highlighted that expanding access to TVET through e-learning initiatives further strengthens knowledge acquisition by reaching learners in remote areas.

Theme 2: Skill Development

In terms of skill development, Respondent 1 stated: "I developed skills in welding and basic electrical installation through the STEP program." Respondents 3, 4, and 5 also affirmed this notion as they shared the various skills they were able to develop through the program. This finding suggests that training programs contribute to workforce readiness by equipping participants with technical skills that enhance employability. The implication is that structured training can bridge skill gaps, making individuals more competitive in the labor market while fostering self-sufficiency and independence. This is supported by Ra, Chin, and Liu (2015), who argued that TVET must remain flexible and industry-driven to meet labor market demands. Similarly, Lechewski et al. (2020) found that informal and non-formal TVET significantly contributes to continuous skill enhancement, particularly among employed individuals.

Theme 3: Starting a Business

In terms of starting a business, Respondent 2 remarked: "These skills have allowed me to start a small home-based bakery, which provides additional financial support for my family." This highlights how vocational training can empower individuals to become entrepreneurs by applying their acquired skills to generate income. The implication is that skill development programs not only create employment opportunities but also encourage self-employment, fostering economic independence and community growth. This aligns with the findings of Ignacio & Tabu (2019), who explored how TESDA's skills training enabled persons with disabilities (PWDs) to gain employment, thereby improving their economic situation. The provision of free training, assessment, and toolkits under STEP further supports the idea that vocational programs can facilitate business startups and livelihood opportunities (TESDA Circular No. 3, 2018).

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Theme 4: Honing Skills

Moreover, in the context of honing skills, the respondent also shared: "With the training, I was able to perfect my baking techniques, leading to a steady flow of customers who appreciate my products." This statement reflects the importance of continuous practice and refinement of skills in maintaining quality and competitiveness in a chosen field. The implication is that ongoing skill enhancement contributes to long-term professional success, enabling individuals to establish a reliable customer base and maintain financial stability. This is in line with the findings of Orbeta and Esguerra (2016), who emphasized that TESDA's mandatory program registration and trainer certification processes ensure the delivery of quality skills training. Additionally, Price & Caboverde (2017) noted that TVET training plays a crucial role in making the labor force adaptable to technological changes, which is necessary for sustaining a business.

Theme 5: Income Generation

In the context of income generation, Respondent 5 shared: "I have gained regular clients and accepting order anytime." Similarly, Respondent 3 stated, "These skills have enabled me to earn by accepting pastries and customize cakes orders". These responses illustrate the direct impact of skill development on financial sustainability. The implication is that vocational programs provide individuals with opportunities to generate consistent income, improving their economic well-being and contributing to local economies. The findings align with ADB (2014), which emphasized that effective training policies enhance individual income and national productivity. Furthermore, UNESCO (2019) recognized TVET as a tool for economic mobility, particularly for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Theme 6: Financial Opportunities

Lastly, the STEP program was not only limited to providing financial opportunities but also had a positive effect on emotional growth. Respondent 1 stated: "These skills have helped me become more confident in taking on small repair jobs in my community and applying for technical jobs." This response highlights the psychological benefits of acquiring practical skills, such as increased confidence and self-worth. The implication is that skill development programs play a crucial role in empowering individuals, boosting their self-esteem, and motivating them to seek better career prospects. Ignacio & Tabu (2019) found that PWD trainees who completed TESDA training experienced increased confidence, particularly in navigating workplace environments. Additionally, Ra, Chin, and Liu (2015) emphasized that TVET should not only focus on hard skills but also foster soft skills such as confidence, problem-solving, and adaptability to fully equip learners for professional growth.

Table 8. Skills developed among graduates of STEP.

Major Themes	Sub-themes	Participants Codes	Frequency
Knowledge Generation	• Learning new practices applicable to work. • New opportunities	P2,	1
Development of Skills	• Strengthened vocational/practical skills • Communication and team work • Hands-on experience	P1, P3, P4, P5	
Business startup	• Livelihood opportunities • Application of entrepreneurial knowledge	P2,	4
Honing Skills	• Improvement and refinement of applied skills • Building confidence	P2,	1
Income Generation	• Earning money through skills acquired • Contributing to family	P1,P4, P3, P5	
Emotional Growth	• Confidence • Self-esteem	P1	

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Benefits Gained by STEP Graduates

Table 9 shows the themes on the benefits that graduates gained from STEP. Based on the statements extracted from the respondents regarding the benefits gained through the STEP program, several key subthemes emerged, highlighting the diverse advantages gained through the program. These include hands-on experience, which enhances practical skills and real-world application; emotional growth, fostering confidence, resilience, and self-improvement; profit, providing financial stability and entrepreneurial opportunities; and job security and career development, ensuring long-term employability and professional advancement.

Theme 1: Hands-on Experience

In terms of hands-on experience, Respondent 1 shared, "STEP gave me hands-on experience that improved my technical skills, making me more competitive in the job market." This statement underscores the importance of experiential learning in technical and vocational education, which enhances skill proficiency and employability (Orbeta & Esguerra, 2016). This aligns with the study emphasizing that TESDA's quality assurance mechanisms, such as mandatory program registration and trainer certification, ensure the delivery of hands-on training that meets industry standards. Additionally, TVET programs must be flexible and industry-relevant to maximize the benefits of hands-on learning for workforce readiness (Ra, Chin, & Liu, 2015).

Theme 2: Emotional Growth

In terms of emotional growth, Respondent 2 stated, "STEP gave me the confidence and practical skills to start my own business." This highlights the psychological benefits of acquiring vocational skills, such as increased confidence and motivation for self-sufficiency (Ignacio & Tabu, 2019). TESDA graduates, particularly persons with disabilities (PWDs), reported heightened self-esteem and confidence after completing their training, enabling them to navigate workplace environments effectively. Similarly, TVET programs should not only focus on hard skills but also develop soft skills such as confidence, resilience, and adaptability to fully equip learners for professional and personal growth (Ra, Chin, & Liu, 2015).

Theme 3: Profit

In the context of profit, Respondent 2 shared her previous dependence on her husband's income, stating, "Before STEP, I relied only on my husband's income. Now, I contribute financially by selling homemade pastries." Additionally, Respondent 3 shared, "These skills have enabled me to earn by accepting clothing alterations and custom dress orders." These findings illustrate how vocational training programs empower individuals to generate income and contribute to household finances (Asian Development Bank, 2014). Well-planned skills training programs lead to increased income and economic mobility. Furthermore, TESDA's training initiatives provided PWD graduates with employment opportunities, enabling them to achieve financial independence and contribute to their families' livelihoods (Ignacio & Tabu, 2019).

Similarly, Respondent 4 highlighted the economic benefits of the STEP program, stating, "Before STEP, I only did odd jobs. Now, I have stable work and a better income." This reflects the program's role in providing employment stability and financial improvement for beneficiaries (Dumaua-Cabauatan, Calizo, Quimba, & Pacio, 2018). Expanding access to TVET ensures that more individuals can secure stable and well-paying jobs. Moreover, TVET is recognized as a key tool for economic development, particularly for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds seeking financial security (UNESCO, 2019).

Theme 4:

On the subject of job security and career development, Respondent 4 stated, "STEP provided me with a new career path in construction." In addition, Respondent 5 shared,

Table 9. Benefits Graduates Gained from STEP.

Major Theme	Subtheme	Participants Code	Frequency
Hands-on Experience	• Application of practical knowledge • Skills enhancement	P1	1
Emotional Growth	• Boosted self-confidence • Empowerment to take initiative	P2	1

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Profit	• Improved household income • Income-generating opportunity	P1,P2 P3, P4	4
Job Security and Career Development	• Stable livelihood or employment • Financial independence and sufficiency	P4, P5	2

"STEP gave me the skills to work as a beauty professional," also adding, "Before STEP, I was unemployed. Now, I have a source of income and financial independence."

These statements reinforce the transformative impact of vocational training in opening new career opportunities and enhancing job stability (Price & Caboverde, 2017). Skills training programs play a crucial role in labor market adaptability, helping individuals transition into new careers. Furthermore, non-formal TVET programs are particularly effective in supporting lifelong learning and career development, as they allow individuals to continuously upgrade their skills to remain competitive in evolving industries (Lechewski et al., 2020).

Challenges Encountered by the Graduates in the Implementation of STEP

Table 10 reveals the challenges encountered by the graduates in the implementation of STEP.

Based on the statements extracted from the interviewees regarding the challenges encountered in the STEP program, several key subthemes emerged. These include the lack of tools, which hinders practical learning and skill application; high cost, which limits accessibility and participation; inadequate publicity, resulting in a lack of awareness and missed opportunities for potential beneficiaries; and difficulties in learning, which encompass challenges in grasping technical concepts and adapting to the training environment.

Theme 1: Lack of Tool

One of the challenges that emerged is the lack of tools, as Respondent 1 shared, "One challenge was the lack of tools and materials during training, which made it difficult to practice consistently." This highlights the significance of having adequate resources to support hands-on learning and skill development. The lack of proper training tools can hinder the practical application of skills, reducing the effectiveness of vocational training programs. This challenge aligns with the findings of Orbeta & Esguerra (2016), who emphasized that access to proper training facilities and resources is crucial for maximizing the benefits of TVET programs. Similarly, Ignacio & Tabu (2019) noted that PWD trainees in TESDA programs faced challenges due to inadequate tools and the need for specialized equipment to accommodate their learning requirements (Orbeta & Esguerra, 2016; Ignacio & Tabu, 2019).

Theme 2: High Cost

Another challenge that has resurfaced is the cost, as Respondent 2 stated, "The main challenge was the high cost of ingredients when starting my business." This finding underscore how financial constraints can limit the ability of program graduates to effectively utilize their newly acquired skills in entrepreneurial ventures. Even with proper training, the initial investment required to start a business can be a significant barrier. This is consistent with the findings of Dumaua-Cabauatan, Calizo, Quimba, & Pacio (2018), who pointed out that the cost of training and business startup expenses remain major concerns for TVET graduates, particularly those in economically disadvantaged communities. Additionally, UNESCO (2019) emphasized that while TVET programs provide essential skills, financial limitations often prevent individuals from fully capitalizing on their training (Dumaua-Cabauatan, Calizo, Quimba, & Pacio, 2018; UNESCO, 2019).

Theme 3: Promoting New Business

Having the necessary tools and financial resources is not always sufficient for business success, as effective publicity is also needed to attract customers. Respondent 3 highlighted this concern, stating, "One challenge was getting

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customers at the beginning because I was new in the business." Similarly, Respondent 5 added, "The biggest challenge was building a client base since I was new to the industry." These statements emphasize the importance of business exposure and customer acquisition in ensuring the sustainability of small enterprises. This finding is supported by Price &Caboverde (2017), who argued that while technical skills are essential, business skills such as marketing and customer relations are equally important for entrepreneurial success. Furthermore, Ra, Chin, & Liu (2015) pointed out that many TVET programs focus primarily on technical competencies and neglect entrepreneurial training, which is crucial for sustaining small businesses (Price &Caboverde, 2017; Ra, Chin, & Liu, 2015).

Theme 4: Learning New Things

In terms of difficulties in learning, Respondent 4 shared, "One challenge was learning to use heavy tools and equipment." This reflects the challenges that some trainees face in adapting to technical skills that require physical effort and specialized knowledge. Learning technical skills, particularly those involving machinery and heavy equipment, can be daunting for individuals with no prior experience. This aligns with the findings of Lechewski et al. (2020), who noted that learners in non-formal TVET programs often struggle with complex technical tasks due to limited prior exposure. Additionally, Ra, Chin, & Liu (2015) emphasized that TVET programs must provide adequate instructional support to ensure that trainees can overcome learning difficulties and develop competency in technical fields (Lechewski et al., 2020; Ra, Chin, & Liu, 2015).

Table 10. Challenges encountered by the graduates in the implementation of STEP.

Major Theme	Subtheme	Respondents Code	Frequency
Lack of Tools	• Inadequate training resources for skill development • Difficulty in mastering techniques	P1	1
High Cost	• Financial strain • Budget	P2	1
Promoting New Business	• Struggles in attracting initial customer base • Limited market visibility during early operations	P3, P5	2
Learning New Things	• Physical and technical challenges in skill acquisition • Overcoming fear or discomfort in operating machinery	P4	1

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IV. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

The profile of graduate-respondents emphasizes the role of socioeconomic conditions in shaping educational attainment, employment opportunities, and future aspirations.

The STEP program significantly contributes to the personal and professional development of its graduates. Through the acquisition and refinement of technical skills, participants not only gained knowledge and employment readiness but also found opportunities to start businesses, generate income, and enhance their emotional well-being.

In terms of the benefits that the graduates gained from STEP, the practical experience, emotional empowerment, financial independence, and improved career prospects. By combining hands-on training with opportunities for personal growth and income generation, STEP not only equips individuals for immediate employment but also fosters long-term professional development and stability.

The challenges encountered by STEP graduates reveal that while STEP offers valuable opportunities for skill development and livelihood, its impact can be significantly improved through better resource allocation, financial support, promotional assistance, and learner-centered training approaches.

V. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the aforementioned findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are hereby proposed:

The administrator of Dumalag Vocational Technical School may identify and implement targeted support programs to address the specific socioeconomic challenges faced by graduate-respondents, such as financial assistance for further education, access to livelihood opportunities, and skills development initiatives. These efforts may be tailored to uplift individuals from low-income and rural backgrounds, ensuring more equitable access to education and employment pathways.

It is recommended that the STEP program may be continuously supported and expanded to reach more beneficiaries, with enhancements in training content, entrepreneurial support, and post-training assistance. Furthermore, provisions for providing follow-up mentoring, access to capital or toolkits, and emotional resilience training may be considered to further strengthen its impact on graduates' long-term personal growth and economic stability.

Implementers of the STEP program may continue to integrate hands-on training with components that promote emotional resilience, financial literacy, and career planning. They may further strengthen partnerships with industries and local businesses to help create more employment pathways and entrepreneurial opportunities so that graduates can sustain and build upon the benefits they gained from the program.

DVTS may address existing challenges by ensuring sufficient training resources and materials, offering startup financial aid or subsidies, enhancing program visibility through community outreach, and adopting learner-centered teaching methods.

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