Case Study

Centre for Data Science and Social Impact (CDSSI)
Indian School of Development Management (ISDM)

Scaling With Purpose: A Case Study on SMART[1]

Skills-for-Market-Training

Fourteen Years of Growth, Experiments, and Learning

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[1] **A note on scope:** this case study captures SMART as delivered through TMF's NGO partners. Where TMF has piloted holding a function, such as placement, directly (like in the SMART Academy), that experience and data fall outside what this case study captures, except where explicitly noted.

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Introduction

In 2009, India's National Policy on Skills Development set an audacious mandate: to skill 500 million people by 2022 (Kapoor, 2012). The number outpaced the capacity of any single skilling institution, and it arrived at a moment when the NGO sector's engagement with vocational training was still nascent. Against this backdrop, Chetan Kapoor, then working with the consulting firm Edulever, began engaging directly with youth and employers in 2011 to understand where the gaps actually lay. That work sharpened into a simple but durable framework: skilling had to be approached through three interlocking levers—curriculum, assessment, and training—each reinforcing the others rather than existing as isolated interventions. It was this thinking, tested in the field rather than built in a boardroom, that Kapoor carried with him when he moved from being a consultant to being a practitioner.

That transition happened at Tech Mahindra Foundation (TMF), the corporate social responsibility arm of Tech Mahindra, which was itself entering a period of structural change. In February 2012, TMF's Board convened for what would prove to be a pivotal meeting: the Board resolved to move skill development from a peripheral activity into a structured, deliberate program area. The timing was not incidental. TMF was simultaneously absorbing the legacy of the Mahindra Satyam Foundation (MSF), which had formally merged into TMF around this period. That merger brought with it the “IT Schools” program, an existing body of centres and relationships.

During this institutional change, the blueprint for SMART (Skills-for-Market-Training) was drawn up in early 2012. At this early stage, the design choice that would define the program's trajectory was made: TMF would not implement SMART directly, but through NGO partners—a choice that, as later sections explore, is really a choice of scaling strategy.

This case study follows SMART from that founding logic through to its present form in 2026. It is not written simply to record what the program has built, though that history matters. It is written as a learning case—an attempt to use SMART's 14-year evolution as a lens on the choices any multi-partner program must eventually confront:

- how to grow without diluting quality,
- how to structure partnerships so that accountability and flexibility coexist, and

- how to define and hold on to an impact pathway as the program scales beyond what its founders could directly oversee.

What follows traces the context from which SMART emerged. This includes the scaling decisions it made at each inflection point, the diversification it undertook to increase its reach, how it held its ground through crisis, what it learned from its experiments at the margins, and the open questions its most recent data now raise for TMF's next phase.

Why SMART Emerged: The Founding Context

To understand why SMART took the shape it did, it helps to look at what TMF was before 2012. Over the years, TMF had been working on four verticals – Education, Women's Empowerment, Vocational Training (VT), and Empowering People with Disabilities. Through this work, it assembled a wide network of NGO partners—more than 70 organisations across Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Pune, and Hyderabad. Vocational training existed within this portfolio, but only in the months immediately preceding 2012 did vocational education and training (VET) receive a deliberate push as a priority area in its own right. This took the form of Yuva English—an English-learning program for young adults, piloted with various NGO partners—as its most developed and replicable asset (Kapoor, 2012).

Across TMF's existing vocational-training partners, a clear pattern emerged: courses ranged from tailoring and embroidery to nurse-aide training, retail management, and sign-language and assistive-technology programs for the visually impaired. Beneficiary groups differed as widely as the courses; and the partner organisations themselves varied enormously in capability and orientation. Beyond a common funder, these efforts had little holding them together. This became one of the central problems TMF had to solve before it could grow further—bringing consistency to this patchwork, while still leaving room for partners to adapt to genuinely different local contexts.

To work through exactly this set of problems, TMF engaged Edulever—the firm where Kapoor had been based before joining TMF, first as COO and then CEO. Edulever's white paper—commissioned by TMF to diagnose the gaps in its existing vocational-training portfolio and lay out a strategy for turning skilling into a structured program area—was completed by early May 2012. This was followed by a TMF offsite in

Lonavala and a visit to Hyderabad in late May to the Koti IT school. Out of this process came the strategy and operational plan that would define SMART's earliest architecture, setting out six imperatives for the program (Kapoor, 2012):

- Leverage existing strengths—the 70-plus NGO network, Yuva English, the IT schools, Mahindra Group placement pathways, and the SaralRozgar job portal.
- Embed quality control from the outset, in a sector where few providers had managed scale without sacrificing it.
- Build in genuine impact measurement rather than relying on anecdotes.
- Use technology across mobilisation, training, and placement.
- Balance consistency with local flexibility.
- Deliver an end-to-end solution spanning mobilisation, training, assessment, placement, and post-placement follow-up.

In July-August of 2012, Kapoor visited an IT School centre in Koti, Hyderabad—one of the sites TMF had inherited through the MSF merger—and identified it as the site for the first SMART centre. The choice built directly on groundwork already laid: Edulever had visited the same Koti centre in late May as part of the field research feeding into its strategy document, and the site's existing infrastructure and staff made it a natural place to pilot rather than build from zero. That October, the Koti centre reopened under the SMART name. Two more centres followed before the year was out, taking the total to three—one in Hyderabad and one in Gurgaon. Vijendra Kumar Rai, who led the Delhi centre from this earliest phase, remembers the initial three settling quickly into whatever courses the local job market could actually absorb—retail, hospitality, and similar service-sector roles—before secretarial and technical courses, and eventually digital marketing, were added as TMF's own market reading matured.

The Scaling Decisions

It's worth pausing on the word "scale" before going further, because SMART's story is really a story about which kind of scale it chose, and when. Shukla (2020) offers a particularly useful synthesis and distinguishes four broad strategies.

- Scaling Up means growing the organisation itself larger: more branches, more staff, sometimes acquisitions, with the entrepreneur retaining direct control over an expanding operation.
- Scaling Out means replicating a proven model through partners, franchisees, or trained community members, so the innovation spreads without the founding organisation growing in headcount at the same rate.

- Scaling Deep means addressing the layered, interrelated needs of the same community rather than a single population more widely—depth of impact within a place, not just reach across places.
- Scaling Vertically means working to change the policies, institutions, and social norms that keep a problem in place, so the innovation gets embedded in systems larger than the organisation itself.

Bradach's line about replication captures the discipline of scaling out: “the objective is to reproduce a successful programme's results, not to slavishly recreate every one of its features” (Bradach, 2003, as cited in Shukla, 2020).

These distinctions are not academic. TMF made an explicit choice among them in 2012—and, as later sections show, made further such choices at nearly every inflection point since, each one a statement about what kind of impact SMART wanted to be known for, not just how large it wanted to become. This case study uses that scaling vocabulary deliberately, naming the strategy behind each major decision as it comes up, so that SMART's 14 years read not just as a growth story but as a record of the values the organisation chose to grow around.

2012: choosing to scale out, not up

When SMART was being designed, the more basic question was whether TMF should implement the program directly or work through others. In the framework above, these correspond to scaling up (TMF growing into a delivery organisation, with its own field staff and infrastructure in every city) or scaling out (replicating a standard through partners and staying comparatively lean). And scaling out, in turn, is not a single choice; it can involve decisions about what kind of partners—established NGOs with existing infrastructure and reach, government agencies with policy weight and scale but slower-moving systems, or smaller, community-rooted organisations with less institutional heft but deeper local trust. TMF ultimately chose NGO partners already embedded in the communities SMART meant to serve, rather than large national implementation partners or a government-scheme route. This was as much a value choice as a logistical one.

Looked at closely, though, this wasn't a clean scaling-out choice. Pure scaling-out logic (replicate a standardised core as widely and efficiently as possible) would have pointed TMF toward whichever partners could deliver reach fastest: a government scheme or a large implementation partner with infrastructure already in place. TMF picked the opposite: smaller, community-rooted organisations, chosen for trust built over years rather than speed of rollout. That is closer to scaling deep’s instinct: depth of relationship within a community over breadth of infrastructure across many; showing up inside what was a scaling-out decision on paper. TMF had recognised that community mobilisation (reaching the right candidates, in the right numbers, in a

given locality) was a capability these rooted organisations already possessed, and one TMF had no fast way of building through government channels or a larger partner. The idea was for TMF to hold the program's structure—its processes, curriculum, quality standards—while partners brought contextual knowledge, community relationships, and mobilisation capability. From the first design choice, this raised a standing question rather than offering a settled answer: when reach and depth pull in different directions, which does SMART prioritise, and at what point in the program's life does that answer change? This case study finds SMART returning to that question, in different forms, at nearly every major decision that follows.

And thus, TMF did the following: first, it set out to identify mission-aligned partners with the technical capacity to replicate the model and, where needed, customise it locally. TMF's due-diligence process for selecting NGO partners was built for exactly this, as Vijendra Kumar Rai describes it. They did a documentary review followed by field visits and meetings with each organisation's board. Second, it developed its own theory of change, so the program established clearly which features of the model were essential to replicate everywhere and which could flex locally. This is what the six imperatives from the 2012 white paper were really doing: TMF's own theory of change, written down before the first centre reopened, so the line between what had to be standard and what partners could adapt was clear from day one.

The VT Resource Centre — infrastructure for scaling out without scaling apart

The infrastructure that did the most work was the VT Resource Centre (VRC), one per region, holding mobilisation approach, training content, MIS, and placement linkages consistent across an increasingly diverse set of NGO implementers. This made TMF's role an anchor rather than a direct service provider: setting processes, quality parameters, curriculum and assessment systems; monitoring implementation; and supporting placement linkages. It built partner capability while partners retained the community relationships that made mobilisation possible. Partners held the expertise TMF needed, and TMF's role was to add value to that expertise, not to sit above it in a funder–recipient hierarchy. When partners hit challenges invisible at the planning stage, the expectation was that they would come back to TMF for joint diagnosis, creating a feedback loop between what was happening on the ground and how the program itself was designed.

A deliberately slow start

The 2012 plan proposed a phased path rather than an immediate scale-up: consolidation through March 2013, a one-year pilot through March 2014, and

expansion only after that. This throttling was part of the scale-out and scale-deep discipline, protecting quality by testing the model before letting the scale of the founding mandate (the Board's resolution, the national 500-million target) dictate the pace. It is why SMART opened with three centres rather than the dozens the founding ambition might otherwise have implied.

The discipline held through the first 18 months. In the first week of April 2013, Kapoor ran two four-day facilitator training workshops—one for the North/ West teams in Delhi, one for the South/East teams in Hyderabad—standardising how facilitators were trained before the network of centres was allowed to widen. By April 2014, at a workshop marking the program's first year, SMART had scaled from three to 14 centres—nearly fivefold—but only after the standardisation work had been done, not before. Shortly after, TMF commissioned a formal online MIS to replace the Google Sheets system the program had been tracking itself on: scaling infrastructure catching up with scaling ambition, so that data quality wouldn't become the constraint on the next phase of growth.

What the early years combined

Taken together, SMART's first two years read as a scaling-out strategy executed with real discipline: geographic and partner expansion built on common processes across curriculum, training, assessment, MIS, monitoring, and placement that different organisations could replicate rather than any one owning. But even at this stage, a second thread ran alongside — a scaling-deep instinct, though nobody was calling it that yet. The organisation treated quality as something it deliberately protected as it expanded, not something that would simply happen if growth was managed carefully. The next section picks this up directly, because the clearest early expression of it—the decision to build a dedicated track for persons with disabilities—is where scaling deep in SMART's history properly begins.

Diversification Decisions

If the previous section was about how SMART grew, this one is about what it grew into—and it is where scaling deep, in Shukla's (2020) sense, becomes visible as a deliberate strategy rather than an instinct. Two moves stand out: an inclusion mandate that produced a dedicated track for persons with disabilities, and a market-facing pivot toward digital and knowledge-economy courses that reshaped the entire portfolio. The first is squarely a scaling-deep decision. The second started as something closer to a scaling-out refinement—the same partner network, a different set of courses running through it. We all now explore these in more detail.

The 10% mandate and the birth of SMART+

One mandate of the SMART program was that 10% of its beneficiaries were persons with disabilities (PwD)—a target framed around who the program served, unlike the salary or placement goals that followed. In early 2013, the first SMART+ centre—a track dedicated entirely to PwD candidates, sometimes referred to internally as SMART Plus—was launched in partnership with the NGO Sarthak. Vijendra Kumar Rai, describing SMART+'s early design, recalls it covering a deliberately wide span of disability categories, from speech and hearing impairment to orthopaedic disability and visual impairment, rather than narrowing to whichever group was easiest to place.

SMART+ set the ceiling for PwD-dedicated training early, and has not reclaimed it since. Enrolment through the dedicated track peaked in 2016-17 at 1,851 candidates and has fallen steadily to 751 by 2025–26—a drop of well over 1,000 candidates (Exhibit A). The general SMART track has carried a small number of PwD candidates throughout this period too, and that number has crept up slightly, but nowhere near enough to account for what SMART+ has lost—at most a tenth of the decline. Whatever happened to the roughly 1,100 candidates SMART+ no longer reaches, they don't appear to have simply moved to a different TMF track.

The location-level data (Exhibit B) adds a layer the national number hides entirely: Chennai and Mumbai have grown steadily through this same window, while Chandigarh, Delhi, and Hyderabad have all fallen well below their mid-2010s peaks. A national chart flattens a story that, underneath it, is quite geography-specific.

However, when asked to explain these numbers, Kapoor's first instinct isn't to explain them away. He asks a different question of the data than the one it was built to answer: who, exactly, has SMART+ been reaching, and at what point in their lives? His own reflection kept returning to age: SMART, across all its tracks, works with candidates who are already close to employable. For a population that often needs more time, not less, to close the gaps between them and a job, that may be too late a starting point. Kapoor has wondered aloud whether reaching PwD candidates earlier—at 15 or 16, while they're still in their formative years rather than at the threshold of the job market—might have changed these numbers more than any tweak to the SMART+ track itself could. It's a question the data can't settle.

The other thread he returns to sits less with the candidates than with everyone around them, and with what they're actually being hired to do. Training more PwD candidates, earlier or otherwise, only goes as far as employers are willing to meet them—not just in whether they hire, but in what kind of role they're willing to offer, and whether that role treats the candidate as capable of more than the most limited task in the building. That is harder and slower to move than an enrollment number. It's a question this case study picks up again in later sections: how does an organisation sustain real impact for

its most marginalised candidates without directly doing the work of changing both the minds of the people who hire them and the nature of the jobs they're hired into?

The strategic pivot to digital and knowledge-economy courses

The second diversification decision was driven less by an inclusion mandate and more by a market-facing target. It illustrates how scaling-out and scaling-deep logics can pull in different directions within the same program. In October 2017, TMF set itself an explicit goal: raise the average joining salary from around ₹7,000 to ₹12,000 within three years. The trigger, as Kapoor described it, was a field observation: students with near-identical profiles were seeing meaningfully different salary outcomes depending purely on which job role they were placed into. Retail and other service-sector roles paid less than technical roles for comparable candidates, so TMF deliberately shifted the course mix toward technical training, which is why SMART-T enrolment rose through this period. The organisation didn't just meet the ₹12,000 target, it surpassed it within two to three years, well ahead of the original horizon.

> *"The same kind of students, the same profile, by just getting them into a different job role, was helping improve salary levels. We thought, why not bring about this shift across the board—very strategically." — Chetan Kapoor, CEO, TMF*

This salary-driven logic, arriving just as COVID-19 forced a parallel and unrelated shift toward remote-friendly work (the next section), compounded into a visible reshaping of the course portfolio (Exhibit C).

With the exception of the Entrepreneurship Development Programme and Pharmacy Assistant, nearly every new-generation course fetched a joining salary above ₹11,000-12,000, against an overall average across the newer portfolio of roughly ₹14,000, which was well above the blue-collar baseline.

Where the growth actually came from

The market realignment paid off in the fastest-growing sectors. Sectors that expanded by more than 500% since 2014 include Food Industry, Exports and Imports, Civic Services, Manufacturing, Law, Healthcare, Agriculture, Automobile, and Banking, Finance & Insurance Services, as well as Electronics & IT Hardware. Security Services, Gems & Jewellery, Furniture & Fittings, Exports and Imports, Healthcare, Agriculture, BPO, and HR Services have shown consecutive positive growth in the most recent years—evidence that the pivot away from blue-collar, service-sector roles tracked genuine demand growth across a wide set of formal-economy sectors, not just a bet on "digital" in the abstract. For PwD placements specifically, Hospitality and Social Development grew more than 2000% off a small 2014 base, with Banking, Finance &

Insurance Services, Healthcare, Consumer Durables, and Manufacturing all growing above 200%—a reminder that the SMART+ enrolment decline discussed above is not for want of employer-side demand in at least some sectors.

The COVID Years: Struggling, and Staying True to Principle

Nothing in SMART's design had anticipated a moment when its centres would simply stop functioning overnight. When lockdown hit, centres closed with no infrastructure in place for online classes. Even where a centre had a projector and a whiteboard, the gap remained: students didn't have Wi-Fi, so staff couldn't reach them remotely. The first few weeks were, by the team's own account, a period of genuine uncertainty about whether the program could keep functioning in any form.

> *"The first few weeks, we all were pretty clueless—how are things going to function? Even if we do online classes, we don't have the infrastructure for it. Even if the centre has the infrastructure—a whiteboard, a projector, Wi-Fi—the students don't have those same facilities available." — Naima Urooj, Regional Head, Western India, TMF*

The response wasn't a clean pivot to digital so much as an improvised, values-consistent move to keep both training and placement alive by whatever means were available. On the training side, centres began running classes online for the first time, which—almost incidentally—opened access to a scattered, largely rural student population that had been difficult to reach before. On the placement side, the picture was harder: entire sectors the program had depended on, like hospitality and retail, closed down completely, cutting off placement pathways for students who had already been trained. TMF's response reflected the same value it had built the program around from the start—balancing employer requirements against youth aspirations rather than treating either as fixed—by turning to local placement at the district, village, and town level. For families that had lost other sources of income during the lockdown (including auto and taxi drivers unable to run their vehicles), even this modest, local employment amounted to real financial relief.

> *"There was a lot of local placement that happened during that time—district level, village level, town level. That amount was a huge help for families, because people had lost jobs. A lot of auto drivers were not able to run their autos, and families were facing a lot of financial strain." — Naima Urooj*

Once the acute crisis passed, COVID left behind a durable capability rather than a stopgap. The organisation had proven—to itself as much as anyone—that it was possible to run SMART online. That confidence outlasted the pandemic: batches

continued running online from 2021 through 2023, and many courses permanently converted to hybrid formats.

Remote access as an unplanned inclusion lever

One consequence of the shift to hybrid delivery wasn't originally part of any plan: it reached more women, particularly in digital-technology courses. This connects to a separate, deliberate pivot before COVID, and was then reinforced by it. Around 2018, TMF noticed its technical courses were running at 90-100% male enrolment in several centres. Rather than accept that as a fixed feature of technical training, TMF scaled down some technical-track offerings and expanded others where female participation was structurally more achievable, working the shift through deliberately over roughly a year.

> *"This spillover of COVID happened. A lot of courses were converted to online, hybrid kinds of courses, and we were able to reach out to more female beneficiaries because of that, especially in digital technologies." — Naima Urooj*

Female and male enrolment track each other closely for most of the decade (Exhibit D). But by 2025-26 the gap had widened further, to 13,013 women against just 4,846 men. Whether that is fully attributable to the deliberate technical-course rebalancing described above, to the hybrid-delivery legacy of COVID, or to something else in how mobilisation itself has changed, is a question worth pursuing rather than assuming an answer. The data tells us the shift happened and roughly when; it doesn't tell us the whole why.

Other Experiments: Access, Reach, and the Limits of a Placement-Numbers Model

Alongside the mainstream SMART and SMART+ tracks, TMF ran a smaller set of deliberate experiments aimed at populations the standard model wasn't reaching well: persons with disabilities in specific high-barrier sectors, transgender candidates, and, separately, people leaving incarceration[3]. TMF set aside a share of its budget specifically to fund this kind of experimentation in access, reach, and inclusion. This work was never expected to produce placement numbers at the scale of the core program, and wasn't held to that standard. It is worth reading these three not as three isolated pilots but as three attempts, in three very different registers, with the same

[3] These are not necessarily the full set of experiments TMF has run at the margins over 14 years; these are the ones that surfaced in this research, likely because they are more recent or more present in interviewees' memory.

underlying question: what does scaling deep actually cost, and who inside a CSR-funded, placement-driven program is willing to carry that cost.

Experiment one: working the employer side for PwD placement

TMF commissioned a year-long, in-depth piece of research carried out by an India Fellow embedded with the team, on employer perceptions around hiring persons with disabilities. But the clearest operational lesson to emerge from the PwD work wasn't really about employer attitudes in the abstract. It was a supply-side insight, and a slightly counterintuitive one: an inclusive centre TMF in Pune showed that producing a consistent, regular flow of trained PwD candidates changed TMF's negotiating position with employers entirely. Instead of TMF having to persuade employers to accept whichever placement became available, a steady output of trained students let the centre be selective about which employers it worked with, and pursue placements that were not just economically viable but dignified.

> *"Getting out students at regular intervals creates a demand for these students in that vicinity. You can afford to select your employers, not necessarily the other way around. That way you can actually help students gain employment that is not just economically beneficial for them, but also more dignified." — Chetan Kapoor*

TMF's own parent company became a small but telling data point in the same story: conversations with Tech Mahindra leadership led to a share of PwD candidates being hired directly into the company, including on marquee projects. It is a reminder that "working the employer side" doesn't always mean an external advocacy campaign — sometimes it starts with turning the same argument inward, at the organisation closest at hand.

These are more than successful anecdotes. They say something about where TMF chose to sit in its own system: not always as an advocate, but as the funder and capability-builder behind organisations whose mandate was advocacy. It did this by working with organisations who worked on the advocacy side. That's a deliberate positioning choice. TMF was explicit that it does not see itself as an advocacy organisation in the way its specialist partners are; instead, it put its resources into helping others build that muscle.

Experiment two: the transgender training pilot

A second, smaller experiment in Bhubhaneshwar, Orissa was taking place where a centre in partnership with a local partner trained transgender candidates for

placement, largely into the beauty and wellness sector. The decision to run this as an exclusive, separate batch — rather than folding transgender candidates into the same classrooms as everyone else wasn't incidental. Vijendra Kumar Rai, who was closely involved in the program's early design, is candid that this was a response to how much the rest of society, including fellow students, was not ready: identities were kept confidential from other batches, and the working assumption internally was that mixed classrooms would have meant real reluctance from other students to even sit with transgender candidates. Whether TMF should have pushed against that reluctance rather than working around it is a fair question, and not one this case study can resolve — but the choice to run exclusive batches was, at minimum, a conscious trade-off, not an oversight. Alongside the training itself, TMF introduced sensitivity and non-discrimination content into its common modules (which Rai refers to as "L&D" attitude training) for staff and students working near these batches, and brought in a transgender trainer, herself from an engineering background, to run some of the sessions directly rather than leaving that work entirely to outside facilitators.

The negotiation with the community itself was not simple either. Kapoor has described a particular "guru" figure within the transgender community functioning as something of a gatekeeper in early conversations. This is the kind of local, informal authority that any program trying to work with this population has to negotiate with, and not always successfully. Those conversations were still unresolved when COVID hit, and the pandemic disrupted both this thread and the traditional occupations many transgender candidates had been engaged in before training. What came out of it was a single, genuinely successful placement, and a deliberate decision by TMF not to try to replicate or scale it further.

> *"It was just a one-off thing... it did give you a glimmer of hope that with this kind of thing, at least something is possible. But sometimes economics can be very cruel, as we know—because it's a community that's used to certain occupations which are otherwise looked down upon, but where the economics are more favourable. The tendency to go back into those occupations is still there, which is why we deliberately did not try to force replication or a scale-up of this. I said, let us just wait and see where this goes, what the gains of it are." — Chetan Kapoor.*

Experiment three: re-entry after incarceration

A separate experiment in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, lasted two years and worked with people transitioning out of incarceration back into mainstream employment. This program ran into the same comparison problem as the transgender pilot: its numbers were never going to come close to the mainstream SMART track, and the centre was

eventually discontinued. However, as Chetan Kapoor says, it was an important experiment because it targeted and worked with an extremely marginalised group who faced complete social ostracism—people who, whatever they had done to serve their time, found the world unwilling to let them back in. This leads back to the same underlying question on scale and impact, one which SMART keeps returning to: how much, and to what extent, will the impact sustain unless the systems around these candidates—employers, workplaces, the attitudes that decide who gets a second chance—are unwilling to change?

What TMF learned: working against the tide, and choosing to keep going

Across all three experiments, the same lesson repeats, and it isn't comfortable for an organisation. Real inclusion work with the most marginalised candidates—transgender candidates, children of sex workers, people leaving incarceration—asks a program to work against the tide: against employer reluctance, against social stigma among peers, against the plain economics that pull people back toward the occupations they were trying to leave. None of that resolves quickly, and none of it produces numbers that look good next to the mainstream track in the same reporting cycle. TMF's own answer, across all three, was not to walk away from that difficulty but to accept that it would need other stakeholders—specialist NGOs, advocacy organisations, community leaders, even a single embedded trainer from within the community itself—carrying pieces of the work that TMF's own core team was not built to carry alone. The summary is less "we solved inclusion", and more "we kept showing up to a hard problem with more patience than the numbers alone would have justified."

> *"I realised that in order to really do justice to that segment, you need an organisation that is totally dedicated to addressing that challenge. The obvious learning is that you need a far more intensive approach of working, a far more patient approach of working — and very focused. So if I were to recast that into something, it would be a separate programme." — Chetan Kapoor*

Urooj's reflection on the same period is more institutional, and worth reading alongside Kapoor's — it names the tension directly rather than resolving it.

> *"We are a CSR, and there is some implication of numbers, some implication of placed numbers that is there. Some of these experiments—it's not that they've all stopped; the transgender centre is still running, maybe not at the scale we would have liked, but there are obvious challenges on the employer side and on the placement side. Because of that, it has not blown up or scaled up as we would have liked." — Naima Urooj*

Vijendra Kumar Rai's own reflection, from the ground level of actually running these batches, is that this work is not something you take on because the numbers justify it, but because it is, in his words, simply TMF's responsibility to try. Sensitisation, in his account, was never a one-time training module. It was an ongoing, low-grade negotiation with everyone around these students, staff and peers alike, that never fully finished.

This connects to a broader point Kapoor returned to about system-level impact: training candidates is only half the intervention. Unless the program also works on employers' mindsets and practices—conditions on the shop floor, supervisors' attitudes, and willingness to consider a candidate for something beyond the most limited role—the demand side, not the supply side, sets the ceiling on impact. In the vocabulary this case study has been using, that is a description of the gap between what SMART has actually done (mostly scaling out, with pockets of scaling deep) and what Shukla (2020) calls scaling vertically—changing the systems and norms that decide whether a trained candidate gets a fair shot at all. So far, TMF has chosen to fund that vertical work through partners rather than build it itself.

> *"There is a need to definitely work with employers more closely, and support them to make more congenial work conditions for entry-level workers. There may be a need to train supervisors on soft skills—we know the shop floor can sometimes be a very harsh environment. But there could be attempts where you get people working at a supervisory level and instill in them some of these attributes." — Chetan Kapoor*

Any organisation working to influence a system this way eventually has to decide where that system's boundary is. This includes how far it tries to change employer behaviour directly, versus how much of that work it funds and supports through advocacy-focused partners, while keeping its own core identity around training and placement. In this case study's terms, that boundary is really a decision about how much vertical scaling an organisation is willing to own itself, and how much it is content to enable in others. SMART has, so far, drawn that boundary fairly conservatively—real vertical work has happened, but almost always at arm's length, funded through partners rather than built as SMART's own capability. Whether it should keep drawing it there is one of the questions the final section returns to.

Recasting SMART

By 2025-26, the numbers tell a fairly blunt story: placements are down from their 2023–24 peak, salaries are essentially flat despite a decade of course-portfolio upgrades, and SMART+ is at its lowest point since 2015-16[4].

These point to a bigger question SMART has been circling for a while: how do you scale in a way that actually changes the larger system around a candidate—not just the number of candidates trained—while still staying financially and organisationally sustainable? SMART's history offers two quite different answers to "how do you stay relevant", and both show up.

On one side is the agility this case study keeps returning to. This includes the 2017 salary target, the deliberate move from blue-collar into technical and digital courses, and TMF reading where the labour market was heading and moving the whole portfolio to meet it, years ahead of most training providers making the same call. That instinct is strategic and fast: spot the signal, reallocate, move on. On the other side are the experiments with PwD, transgender, and formerly incarcerated candidates, which ran into a different wall entirely: real inclusion work doesn't reward agility. It takes patience and flexibility that a placement-driven, partner-replicated model isn't naturally built to give, and no amount of reading the market faster fixes that.

Naima's account of how these pivots happened is less about any single decision and more about a pattern she sees running through them all.

> *"These changes are situational, but they're also planned, and very, very strategic when we are implementing them." — Naima Urooj*

What holds these and the earlier pivots together, in TMF's own account, is less any single strategic insight than how change has moved between TMF and its partners. Partners are given real time to absorb a change before anything like a consequence follows, and problems are worked through as shared diagnosis rather than penalty.

> *"All the changes that have gone to the partners, there has been some time that has been given to the partners to implement —the expectation has not been that we'll see this change in one cycle... that sort of trust the partner had in TMF, and TMF also had in the partner, has helped, instead of just going as a typical funder and saying you're out in six months." — Naima Urooj*

SMART's history bears testimony to a program built on agility, an ability to read the market, and strategic, often pioneering decisions balanced against its founding principles and values. It experimented, and learnt about patience, employer mindsets, and how far good intentions travel without the numbers to back them. It has scaled out

[4]One pattern in the data, though, turns out to be about recordkeeping rather than performance. Through 2019-20, placements were explicitly labelled "Employed Through Partner" in the MIS. From 2021-22 onward, that label all but disappears, replaced by a general "Employed" category. Read on its own, this could suggest that partners stepped back from placement or that TMF took it on directly. Naima and Chetan explain that neither is the case: it reflects a change in how the MIS categorised placements after a revamp around this period, and partners have continued to handle placement across the SMART centre network this case study covers."

with real discipline, scaled deep at the edges, and barely scaled vertically at all—not because one approach is superior, but because each was the right tool for a particular moment, and each carries its own cost in trust, time, and money. If SMART were recast today, which of these would it lean on, in what combination, and what would it have to give up—in speed, in scale, in comfort with the numbers looking smaller for a while—to actually do it?

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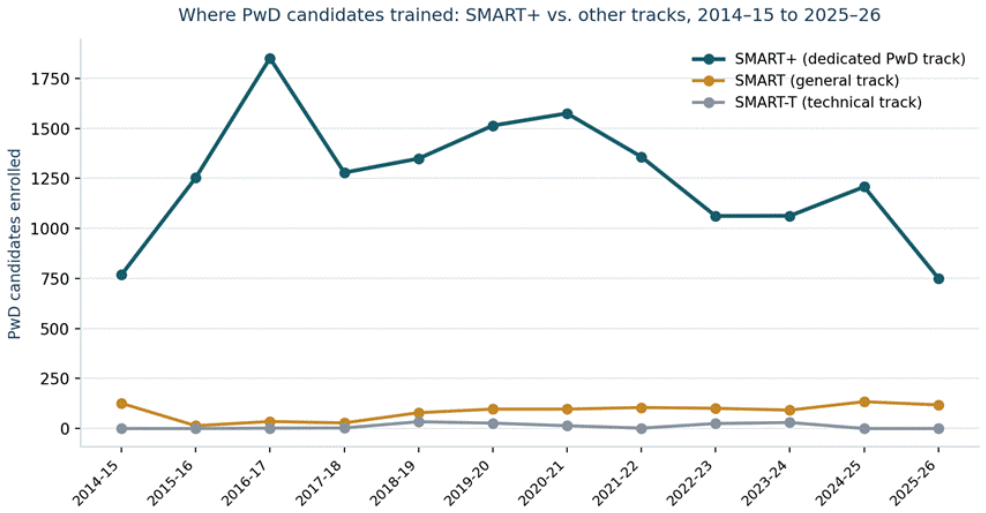
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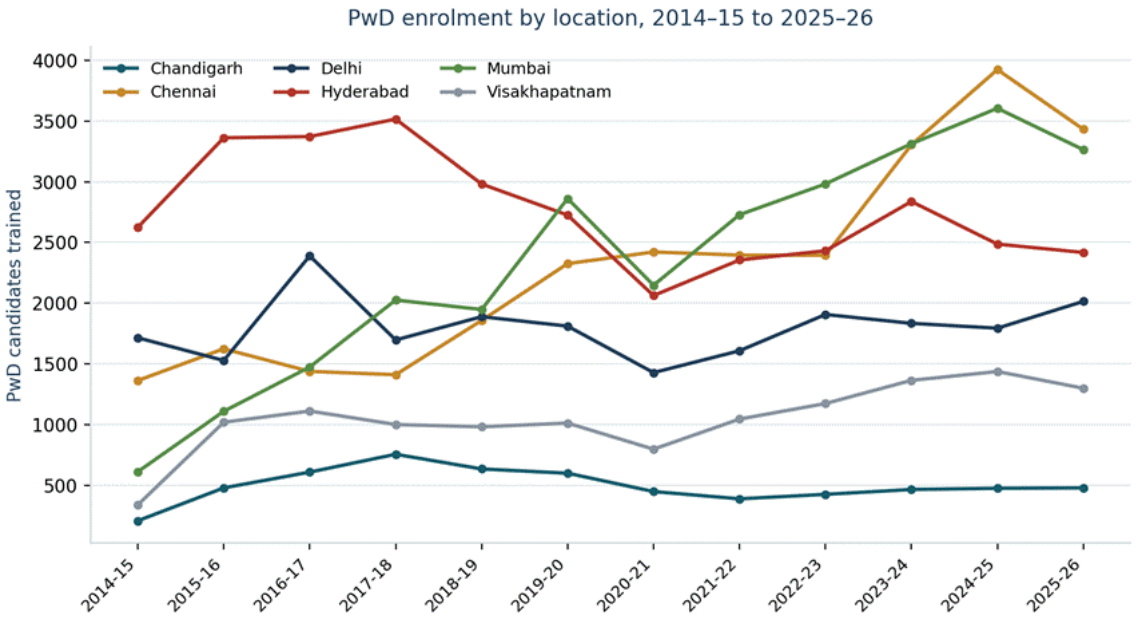
Exhibits

Exhibit A. *PwD candidates by track (SMART / SMART+ / SMART-T), 2014–15 to 2025–26*



SMART+ has declined from its 2016–17 peak of 1,851, while a small but persistent share of PwD candidates continue to train through the general SMART track.

Exhibit B. *PwD candidates trained by location, 2014–15 to 2025–26*

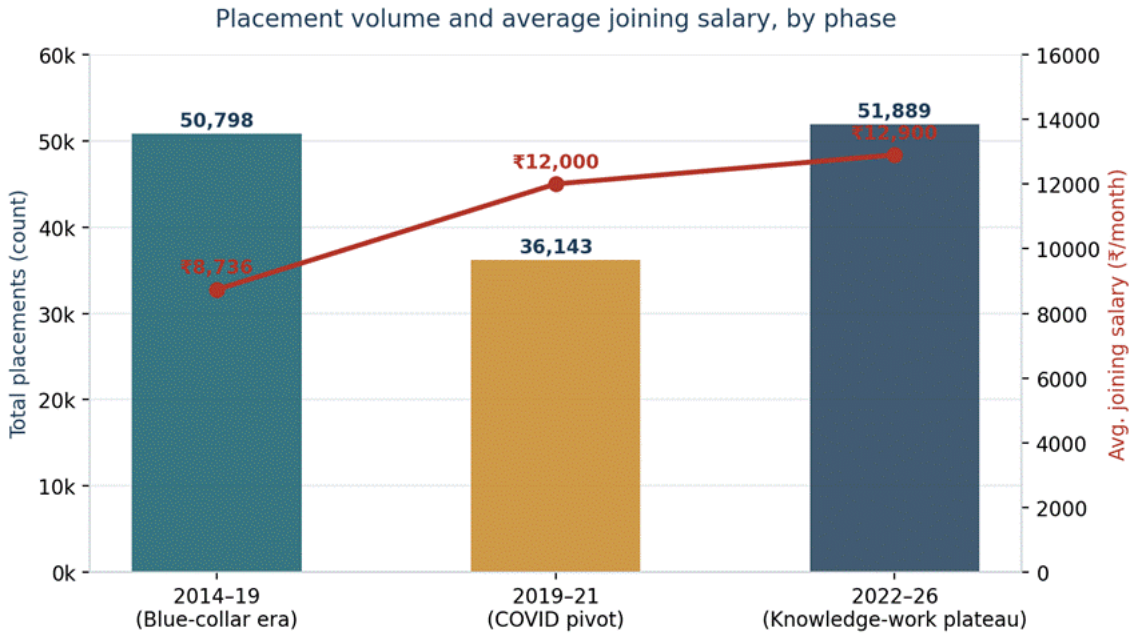


Location	2014–15	2018–19	2021–22	2025–26	Grand Total
Hyderabad	2,625	2,982	2,356	2,418	33,180
Mumbai	611	1,948	2,729	3,265	28,075
Chennai	1,363	1,858	2,396	3,433	27,896
Delhi	1,715	1,889	1,608	2,015	21,616
Visakhapatnam	338	981	1,045	1,299	12,576
Chandigarh	207	634	388	478	5,960

Exhibit C: *List of courses offered*

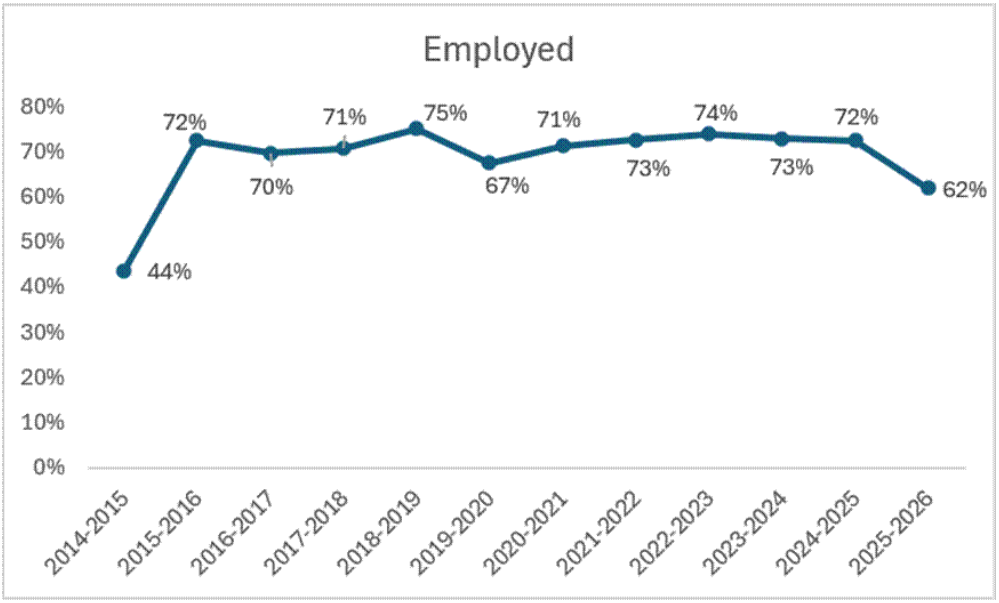
Courses phased out	Courses introduced since 2019/2022
Drivers and Couriers	Digital Marketing
Basic Welding	MIS Executive
Front Desk Officer	Data Management / Analyst
Metal Gas–related trades	Graphic Designing
Critical Care Assistant	Medical Billing
Early Childhood Development	Entrepreneurship Development
Special Needs Programme	DTH & Optical Fibre
Lab Assistant / EMT-Basic	Office Administration
Diploma in Inclusive Education	Finance & Accounting Executive

Exhibit D: *Placement volume and average joining salary across three phases of SMART's course portfolio*



2014–19: blue-collar era. 2019–21: COVID-forced pivot toward digital/remote-capable roles. 2022–26: knowledge-work plateau — salary gains flatten even as the course mix keeps shifting upmarket.

Exhibit E. *Share of enrolled candidates employed, by year*



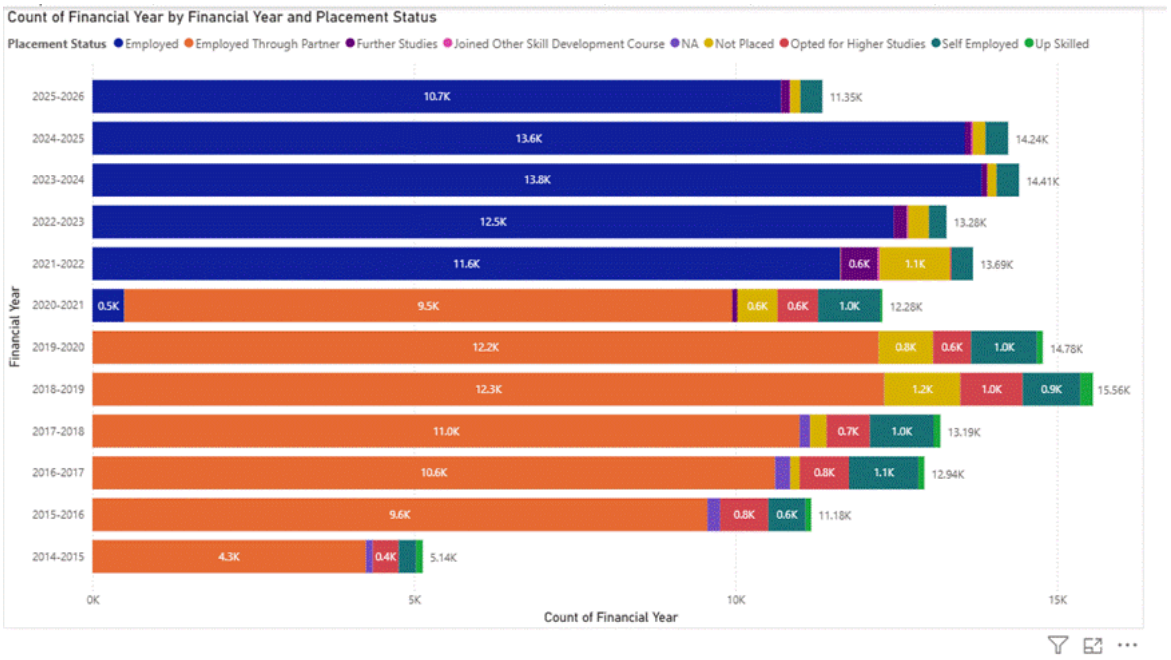
Placement performance has stayed above 70% in most years, with two visible exceptions: the COVID dip of 2019–20 (67%) and a steeper fall in 2025–26 (62%).

Exhibit F. *Enrolment by financial year and gender*



Female and male enrolment track closely until 2023–24; by 2025–26 female enrolment (13,013) is nearly three times male enrolment (4,846). The transgender category ("T") has never exceeded 31 candidates in a single year.

Exhibit G. *Placement status trend: direct employment vs. employment through partner*



Employment through partners has continued throughout the SMART centre network. What changes from 2020–21 onward is how the MIS records and labels placements.