

Impact Assessment Report Smile Foundation Youth Skilling Centre program

Delhi | Bengaluru | Pune | Kolkata | Hyderabad |
Mumbai

Submitted to:



Submitted by:



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Acronyms

| | |
|----------------|--|
| BFSI | Banking, Financial Services & Insurance |
| CE | Core Employability |
| GDA | General Duty Assistant |
| HR | Human Resources |
| IT/ITES | Information Technology & IT-Enabled Services |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organization |
| POS | Point of Sale |
| STeP | Smile Twin E-Learning Programme |

Executive Summary

The **Smile Foundation's urban livelihood Skilling Program (STeP)** is impactful in enhancing employability among marginalized youth. By providing industry-aligned vocational training, the program bridges the gap between education and employment, ensuring that young individuals gain the necessary skills to thrive in high-demand sectors. This assessment evaluates the effectiveness of the program, measuring its impact on placements, income growth, and career progression while identifying areas for enhancement. This impact assessment evaluates the effectiveness of the STeP program using a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative research. Data was gathered from three key stakeholder groups—program participants (50), implementers (05), and placement partners (05). Surveys captured measurable employment outcomes, salary progression, and stakeholder satisfaction, while in-depth interviews provided deeper insights into personal experiences and program effectiveness. The assessment also examined curriculum alignment with industry needs and identified operational strengths and gaps.

Key Findings

- All surveyed trained youth secured employment, with over 90% placed across Retail, BFSI, IT/ITES, and Healthcare sectors. A majority (72%) were hired within 6 months of completing training, including many first-time job seekers (64%) transitioning from school or informal work into formal jobs. All placements were in fields related to their training, indicating a strong job-skill alignment and an effective training-to-employment pipeline.
- **Transformative Income Growth:** Program participants reported significant income increases after the program. The median monthly income rose from just ₹1,500 (pre-training)¹ to **₹15,000** post-placement –that lifted many from unemployment to steady earnings. Over 90% of trained youth say their financial situation improved, and 96% now contribute more to their families' income. For example, one beneficiary from Bengaluru (IT/ITES trade) noted, *"I am now supporting my family financially as my father cannot work,"* highlighting the program's impact on household livelihoods.
- **Sector-Wise Impact and Versatility:** The program's versatility is evident in successful placements across multiple industries. BFSI (banking/finance) accounted for the largest share (32%) of jobs, followed by IT/ITES and Core Employability (20%), Healthcare (18%) and Retail (10%). Each sector-specific training led to relevant roles – e.g. retail trainees became store associates, IT trainees joined BPO or tech support, BFSI trainees secured bank or insurance sales roles, and healthcare trainees became hospital assistants. Starting salaries varied by sector: BFSI and IT/ITES roles had higher entry pay (typically ₹15,000–₹20,000/month), whereas Retail and Healthcare roles started around ₹10,000–₹15,000 (often supplemented by incentives in retail, and offering social impact in healthcare). Notably, placement partners across sectors affirmed that STeP-trained youth meet their skill needs, underscoring the program's industry-aligned curriculum.
- **Inclusive & Gender-Equal Outcomes:** Women benefited on par with men – achieving equivalent ~100% placement rates and similar income gains. Female trainees, many

¹ Source: Based on self-reported income data provided by trained youth during the impact assessment survey.

entering the workforce for the first time, reported increased confidence and social acceptance after the program. Training centres provided a safe, supportive environment that enabled women to enter traditionally male-dominated sectors like IT and BFSI. Conversely, male youth also ventured into fields like healthcare, breaking gender norms. Stakeholders noted families becoming more supportive of young women's careers as they saw them succeed – for instance, one alumna's initially sceptical family became proud after seeing her confidently assisting customers at a retail job.

- **High Satisfaction & Skill Development:** Job satisfaction among placed program participants is outstanding. Most of the respondents are satisfied with their jobs, with **56% “very satisfied.”** The trained youth overwhelmingly feel their employment is a good match for their skills: *94%* agreed that the training gave them the skills needed for their current job. Participants also became more aware of career paths – *76%* feel “a lot more aware” of how to progress in their careers after STeP. Many have set ambitious goals (pursuing promotions, further skills, or even entrepreneurship), reflecting newfound confidence. Employers and trainers echo these positive outcomes: *80%* of hiring partners are “very satisfied” with STeP-trained youth performance and preparedness. Implementers likewise observed marked improvements in program participants' soft skills, professionalism, and mindset, calling the program “*highly inclusive*” and “*fully aligned with market needs.*”
- The assessment also identified areas for further enhancement to strengthen long-term employability and career growth. While the training is effective in securing entry-level jobs, ongoing industry trends necessitate curriculum updates, particularly in advanced digital skills and hands-on learning. Pre-placement support, including more intensive interview preparation and career counselling, would further boost trainees' confidence and job readiness.
- Post-placement engagement remains an area of opportunity, as creating a structured alumni network could facilitate mentorship, continuous learning, and career tracking. Strengthening industry partnerships through advisory councils, internships, and hiring commitments will ensure that the program remains dynamic and responsive to evolving employer needs.
- The program's proven model presents a strong case for expansion, particularly into rural areas, leveraging digital tools to scale while maintaining training quality.

Key Recommendations:

To build on these successes, the assessment recommends strategic enhancements.

- Curriculum updates should incorporate more hands-on practice and advanced content (e.g. digital skills) to keep pace with industry trends.
- Pre-placement support can be strengthened with intensive interview preparation and one-on-one career counselling, ensuring every trainee is confident and informed when job hunting.

- Post-placement program participants' engagement is advised – for example, creating program participants' network for mentorship, continued skill development, and tracking long-term progress.
- Deeper industry partnerships (e.g. advisory councils, internships, hiring commitments) will help keep the program responsive to employer needs and expand opportunities for trainees.
- Finally, a scaling plan should extend the model to new cities (including rural areas), leveraging technology for wider reach while maintaining training quality.

These recommendations aim to sustain and amplify the program's impact in the coming years.

In summary, the STeP Youth Skilling Program demonstrates an effective, scalable solution to youth unemployment. Based on the sample surveyed during the assessment, it achieves near-universal job placement for underprivileged youth, multiplies their incomes, and equips them with skills and confidence for future growth. With continued refinement and support, the program is well-positioned to expand its reach and transform more lives through gainful employment.

Section A: Introduction

Youth unemployment and underemployment remain pressing challenges in India's growing economy. Despite the increasing demand for a skilled workforce, freshly trained youth and disadvantaged youth often struggle to secure decent jobs due to a **skills gap**—a mismatch between what formal education provides and what industry's entry-level roles require. Many young individuals, particularly from underprivileged backgrounds, lack access to job-oriented training, digital literacy, and essential employability skills, which limits their career prospects. Addressing this gap is crucial not only for individual livelihoods but also for India's overall economic growth and workforce productivity.

To tackle this challenge, Smile Foundation launched the Smile Twin E-Learning Programme (STeP)—a livelihood initiative designed to bridge the skills gap for underprivileged youth. The program offers free vocational training, equipping participants with basic computer proficiency, communication and soft skills, and sector-specific knowledge tailored to industries such as Retail, Banking and Financial Services (BFSI), Information Technology/Information Technology Enabled Services (IT/ITES), Healthcare, and Core Employability roles. Beyond training, STeP provides structured job placement assistance, ensuring that youth can transition smoothly into formal employment. By enhancing employability, the program aims to empower urban and rural youth with sustainable livelihoods, financial independence, and brighter career prospects.

A1: About the Report

This report presents a **comprehensive impact assessment** of the **STeP Youth Skilling Centres**, evaluating the program's success in achieving its core objectives of **employment generation and youth empowerment**. By integrating **quantitative data** (such as **employment rate, income growth, and job stability**) with **qualitative insights** (beneficiary experiences, testimonials, and stakeholder feedback), the assessment provides a **360-degree evaluation** of the program's effectiveness.

The key objectives of this assessment include:

- **Measuring Employment Outcomes: Examining the** job placement rate, sector-wise distribution, **and** time taken for employment **post-training**.
- **Assessing Economic Impact:** Evaluating changes in **income levels**, financial independence, and contribution to family earnings.
- **Understanding Participant Development: Analysing** job satisfaction, career awareness, and skill acquisition **among trainees**.
- **Identifying Gender and Geographic Trends:** Breaking down outcomes **by gender, sector, and city** to identify any disparities or success patterns.
- **Evaluating Program Design & Industry Alignment: Gathering** feedback from employers and implementers **to assess** curriculum relevance, placement effectiveness, and areas for enhancement.

- **Providing Strategic Recommendations: Suggesting** program enhancements **such as** curriculum updates, industry partnerships, mentorship programs, and expansion strategies **to scale impact and sustain employment outcomes.**

A2: Report Structure

This report is structured as follows: The **Methodology** section outlines the approaches used for data collection and analysis. The **Findings** section presents insights on program performance, including employment outcomes, income changes, geographic (city-wise) distribution, gender-based outcomes, sectoral trends, and participant development indicators such as satisfaction, career awareness, and skill acquisition. The **Recommendations** section offers actionable suggestions related to training improvements, industry collaboration, participant engagement strategies, program expansion, and curriculum enhancement. The report concludes with a **Conclusion** summarizing the program’s overall effectiveness, sustainability, and potential to serve as a scalable model for youth skill development.

Section B: Methodology

This impact assessment employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative surveys and qualitative research to provide a comprehensive understanding of the program's outcomes. The study involved data collection from three primary stakeholder groups:

- 1. Program Participants:** A Participant Interview was conducted with 50 recent STeP-trained youth who had completed training and entered the workforce. The survey included structured questions to capture quantitative indicators (employment status, salary changes, job satisfaction, etc.), along with open-ended questions for personal feedback. This ensured a balance of measurable outcomes and firsthand narratives reflecting the youth perspective.
- 2. Placement Partners:** A Placement Partner Interview targeted employers who had hired STeP-trained youth. Respondents included HR managers and team leaders from companies across the Retail, BFSI, IT/ITES, and Healthcare sectors. Their feedback on the job readiness of trainees, relevance of skills, and overall satisfaction with the placement process helped assess industry alignment and highlight potential gaps in training.
- 3. Program Implementers:** An Implementer Interview was conducted with Smile Foundation's Program Team, including the General Manager and Regional Officers. A total of five program implementers provided insights on program delivery, curriculum effectiveness, inclusivity, market alignment, and operational challenges. Their inputs helped validate participant-reported outcomes and identify strengths and areas for improvement.

Additionally, in-depth case stories were developed from select participants, allowing for a deeper exploration of individual experiences—such as how employment influenced their families or personal aspirations. These narratives were coded thematically to extract recurring patterns and meaningful insights.

To generate a **holistic and reliable understanding of program outcomes**, a structured **Mixed-Methods Impact Assessment** approach was adopted. This framework integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods across five critical stages—**tool development, enumerator training, data collection, quality assurance, and analytical techniques**. Each step ensures methodological rigour and contextual relevance, moving from limited insights to a comprehensive understanding of the program's effectiveness and impact.

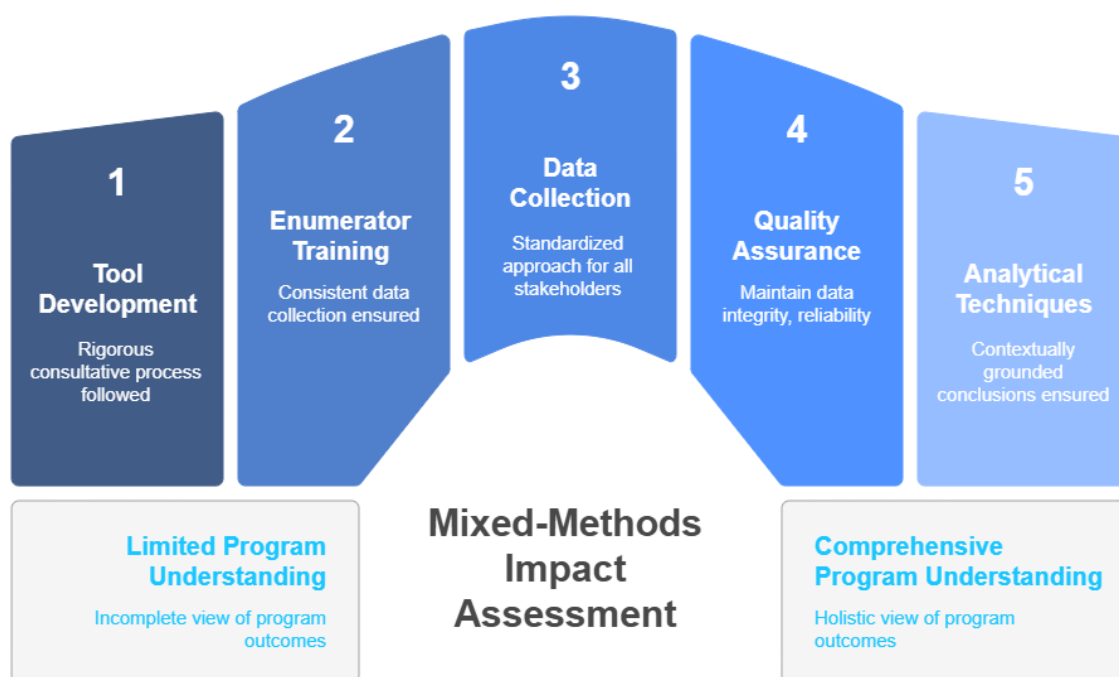


Figure 1: Different stages of the assessment

B1: Tool Development

To ensure the reliability and relevance of data collection, a rigorous consultative process was followed in collaboration with the Smile Foundation team. The tools were developed based on:

- The agency's sector expertise
- A review of program-related documents
- Insights from the inception meeting

Through this iterative process, three structured interview schedules were developed for the key stakeholders (participants, implementers, and placement partners). These tools were designed to capture both quantitative indicators and qualitative insights, ensuring a holistic assessment of the program's impact.

B2: Onboarding & Training of Data Enumerators

Given the regional and geographical spread of the program, five data enumerators were onboarded from Kolkata, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Delhi, and Pune. A virtual training program was conducted on February 01, 2025, to ensure consistent data collection and adherence to quality standards.

The training covered:

- **Orientation about the program** – Understanding the objectives, scope, and key components of STeP
- **Study objectives** – The rationale behind the impact assessment and key evaluation criteria
- Orientation on different tools – Familiarization with interview schedules and structured surveys
- **Introduction to CAPI (Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing)** – Digital data collection methodology
- **Audio recording protocol** – Ensuring complete documentation and accuracy of telephonic interviews

All interviews were conducted telephonically to maintain consistency, data reliability, and respondent comfort. Enumerators were trained to handle interviews ethically, ensuring confidentiality and accuracy while minimizing response bias.

B3: Data Collection Process

As per the sample list provided by the Smile Foundation, data enumerators contacted participants to confirm their availability for the interview. Upon confirmation, they obtained verbal consent for both the interview and audio recording. This standardized approach was followed with all key stakeholders to ensure consistency and ethical compliance.

The data collection phase commenced on February 4, 2025, and was completed on March 5, 2025.

B4: Quality Checks & Assurance

To maintain data integrity and reliability, the following quality assurance measures were implemented throughout the data collection and analysis process:

- **Pilot Testing & Tool Refinement:** Before initiating full-scale data collection, interview tools were tested with a small sample to assess clarity, relevance, and effectiveness. Necessary refinements were made based on feedback.
- **Real-time Interview Monitoring:** Supervisors randomly monitored live calls to ensure enumerators adhered to standardized protocols and maintained data accuracy.
- **Audio Recording for Verification:** All telephonic interviews were recorded with participant consent, enabling cross-verification of responses to minimize errors and inconsistencies.
- **Daily Oversight & Communication:** A dedicated WhatsApp group facilitated real-time issue resolution, while daily debriefing sessions allowed teams to discuss challenges, ensure adherence to protocols, and implement corrective actions.
- **Comprehensive Data Cleaning & Validation:** Post-collection, responses were systematically reviewed for inconsistencies, missing data, and discrepancies. Erroneous entries were identified and corrected to ensure accuracy before analysis.

Sample Overview

The graphic illustrates the sample distribution framework used for the study, segmented by six major cities and five key employment sectors. This ensures comprehensive representation across urban geographies and industry domains.

Table 1: Sample Distribution (Program Participants)

| City / Sector | BFSI | CE | Healthcare | IT/ITES | Retail |
|---------------|------|----|------------|---------|--------|
| Delhi | 05 | 05 | - | - | 05 |
| Bengaluru | 05 | - | - | 10 | - |
| Pune | - | - | 05 | - | - |
| Kolkata | - | 05 | 04 | - | - |
| Hyderabad | 04 | - | - | - | - |
| Mumbai | 02 | - | - | - | - |
| Total | 16 | 10 | 09 | 10 | 05 |

Sample Distribution by City and Sector

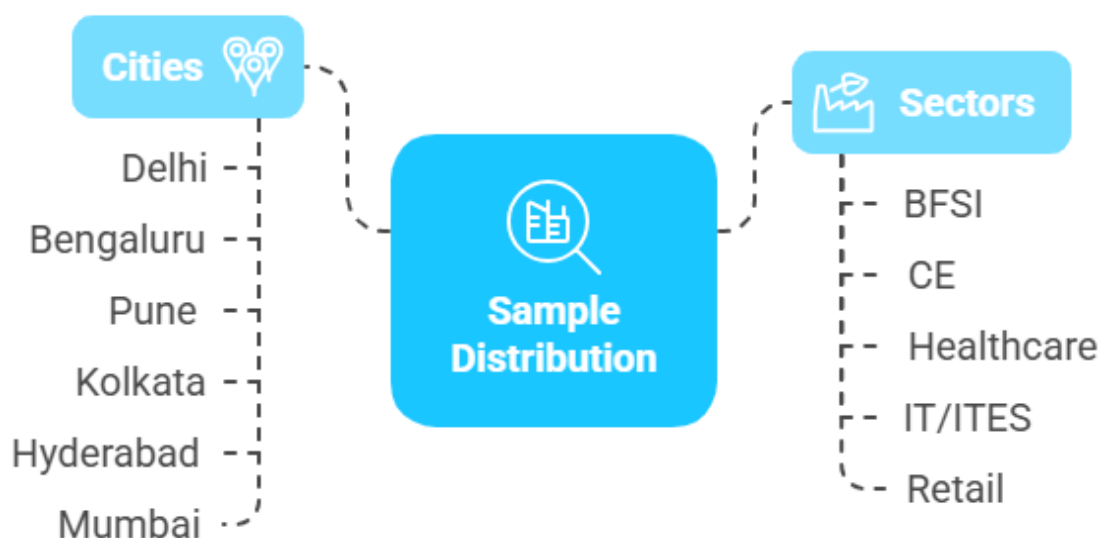


Figure 2: Sample distribution across six metropolitan cities and five major industry sectors.

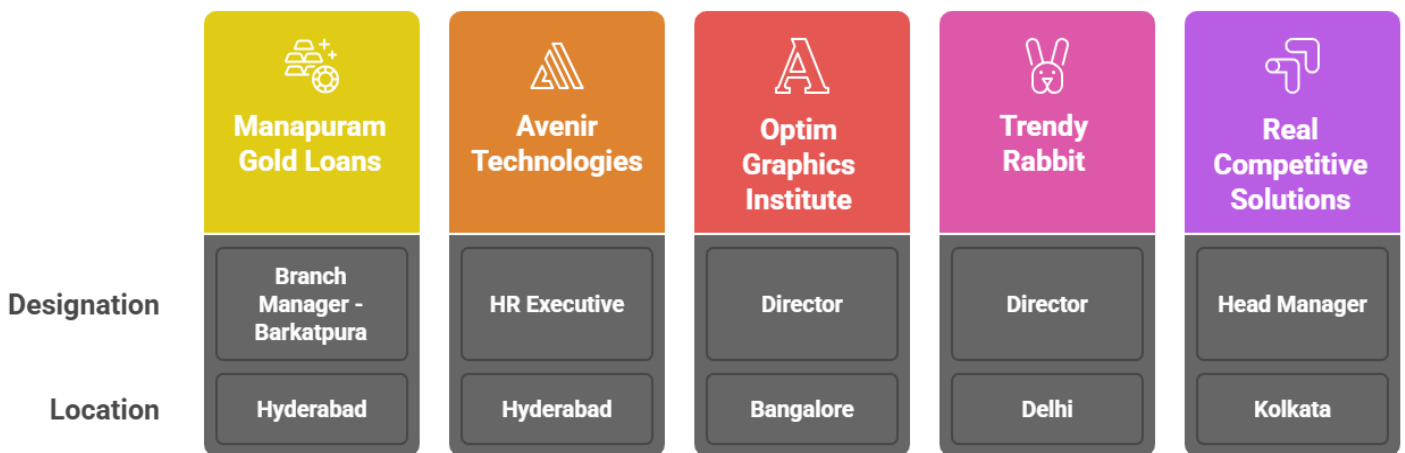


Figure 3: Sample Distribution (Placement Agencies)

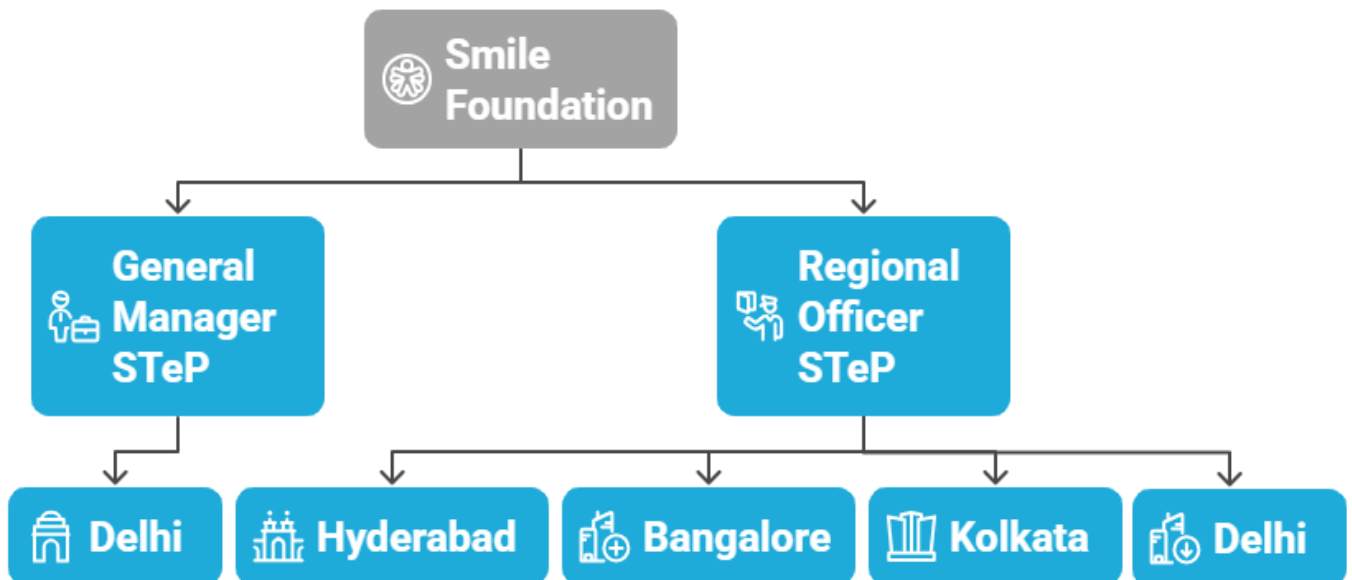


Figure 4: Sample Distribution (Smile Foundation's Program Team)

B5: Analytical Techniques

The quantitative survey data were analysed to compute key outcome metrics, including:

- Placement Rate – Percentage of surveyed trainees employed
- Pre- vs. Post-Program Income Levels – Median and mean salary comparisons
- Job Satisfaction and Training Usefulness – Percentage of positive feedback

Further, city-wise and gender-disaggregated analyses were conducted to explore variations in program impact. Statistical comparisons (e.g., median income gain) helped measure the magnitude of change.

Triangulating quantitative data with qualitative insights from interviews and case stories ensured contextually grounded conclusions. Themes consistently echoed across all stakeholder groups (e.g., alignment of training with job market needs) were identified as key strengths. Meanwhile, areas where stakeholder feedback diverged (e.g., participants requesting more IT content and employers also emphasizing the same) were highlighted for potential program improvement.

This rigorous approach ensures that findings and recommendations are based on solid evidence, stakeholder perspectives, and cross-validated insights, making them actionable for future program enhancements.

Section C: Findings

C1: Employment and Placement Outcomes

Placement Rate: Notably, **64%** of participants were *first-time* job seekers who had never held a formal job before STeP. For these youth, transitioning directly from school or unemployment into a stable job is a remarkable achievement that breaks what could have been a cycle of underemployment.

Table 2: City-wise Median Salary

| City | Participants Surveyed | Median Post-Training Salary |
|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Delhi | 15 | ₹15,000/month |
| Bengaluru | 15 | ₹15,000/month |
| Kolkata | 9 | ₹12,000/month |
| Pune | 5 | ₹15,000/month |
| Hyderabad | 4 | ₹15,000/month |
| Mumbai | 2 | ₹13,000/month |
| Total | 50 | ₹15,000/month |

Analysis: Salaries vary slightly by region, with metros like Delhi and Bengaluru offering slightly higher starting salaries. The median salary across program intervention cities is consistent.

Table 3: Gender-wise Salary Comparison

| Gender | Participants | Median Salary (₹/month) |
|--------|--------------|-------------------------|
| Female | 29 | ₹16,000 |
| Male | 21 | ₹16,000 |

Analysis: The program achieves **gender equity** in employment, with no significant difference in starting salaries. This suggests the program effectively supports both men and women in securing jobs at fair wages.

Quick Transition to Work: Most trained youth find employment very quickly after training. Approximately **72%** were employed within 6 months of program completion – with **34%** securing jobs in under 3 months and another **38%** within 3–6 months. The remaining trained youth had also secured jobs and had been working longer-term: 16% had 6–12 months of job tenure, and 12% were in jobs for 1–3 years. This indicates not only prompt initial placement but also job **retention** among many earlier-trained youth – some have remained steadily employed for over a year, reflecting stability in those positions. No particular city or training batch lagged; placement rates were uniformly high across the board (as further discussed in the city-wise analysis).

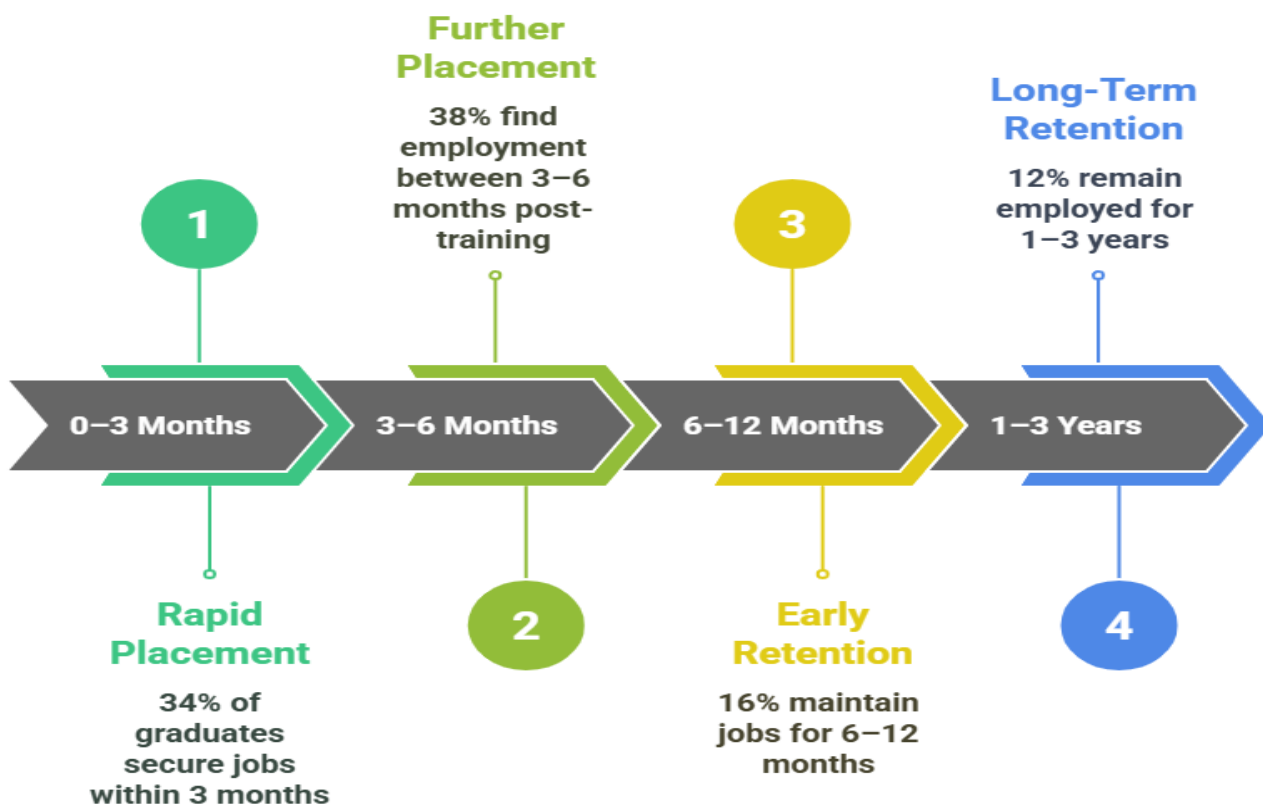


Figure 5: The graphic shows progressive employment outcomes, with most youth placed within 6 months and a portion retained up to 3 years post-training.

Diverse Job Roles Aligned with Training: Importantly, all those placed found jobs in sectors related to their training, underscoring a strong match between the skills learned and the roles secured. Trained youth have moved into a wide range of entry-level positions: for example, Sales Associate or Customer Service roles in retail stores, Data Entry Operator and BPO support roles in IT/ITES, Nursing/General Duty Assistant positions in hospitals (healthcare sector), and Relationship Officer or Loan Officer roles in banking (BFSI). In total, **over two dozen unique job titles** were reported by the 50 program participants, showing that the program does not funnel everyone into one or two jobs but rather opens multiple career pathways. One trainee who specialized in retail noted that the module on “Retail store operations and workplace etiquette” helped him quickly adapt to his store’s processes and sales targets – illustrating how training content directly translated to on-the-job performance.

Placement Partner’s Satisfaction with Candidates: Feedback from the placement partner confirms that these high placement numbers are backed by quality. In the placement partner survey, 80% of the respondents said the program’s placement process is “very effective” in supplying job-ready youth. Every placement partner surveyed found the STeP-trained youth to meet their entry-level skill needs (100% felt the hires were relevant to their requirements, with 60% saying highly relevant). One placement partner noted, “The programme offered is relevant, and it helps the students become skilled and confident in attempting the interview. The overall quality of the candidates is good, and

the highlight is the training offered.” This perspective illustrates that STeP is hitting the mark in preparing youth for real workplace demands.

Placement Partner's feedback for improvement-

The placement partner, shared their observations and recommendations to enhance the overall effectiveness of the placement process and improve candidate retention.

- **Enhancing Training & Skill Development**
 - Incorporating advanced training modules will help candidates become more job-ready and aligned with industry demands.
 - There is a strong requirement for Tele-calling, basic Excel sheet improvement, and English-speaking courses, which can significantly improve candidate proficiency in various roles.
 - Additional skill courses are essential, especially in large towns where the market is expanding and there is a growing demand for skilled human resources.
- **Strengthening Employer-Candidate Engagement**
 - Building better communication and engagement between employers and candidates will lead to better understanding and alignment of expectations, resulting in reduced attrition.
- **Improving Post-Placement Support**
 - Continuous support after placement is crucial to ensure job retention and career growth. This includes mentorship, guidance, and regular check-ins to address challenges faced by the candidates in their new roles.
- **Internship & Market Exposure for Sales Roles**
 - Sales roles require market exposure and a one-month free internship with a monthly stipend for living and transportation would be highly beneficial in preparing candidates for real-world challenges.
- **Reducing Early Attrition at City-Level Placements**
 - In cities with better job opportunities, many students tend to leave their jobs within a few months for higher salaries. To address this, it would be beneficial to mandate a minimum service period at the initial job location to ensure stability and long-term career growth.

Overall, the program is placing nearly every trained youth into a job quickly, in roles that align with their training, and employers are highly satisfied with the hires. The next sections delve into outcomes by city, gender, sector, and other dimensions to further illustrate the impact.

C2: Income Growth and Financial Impact

Securing a job is one milestone; the **financial uplift** it provides is equally critical in evaluating impact. The assessment found **improvements in participants' incomes** after completing the STeP program, signalling a leap in economic status for them and their families. Figure 6 below summarizes the before-and-after income situation of surveyed youth:



Figure 6: Personal Income Before vs. After STeP Training

Note: “Before STeP” figures reflect participants’ status/income before enrolling (many had no job or very meagre earnings), and “After STeP” reflects their status/income in the job secured post-training.

Baseline – Extremely Low Incomes: Before joining the program, the vast majority of these youth had little to no personal income. **64%** of surveyed participants reported earning *zero* income before STeP (they were unemployed or not earning at all). Others were making only meagre amounts through informal or part-time work. This very low baseline highlights that most entrants were either unemployed or severely underemployed in unstable, low-paying activities. Many households of participants depended on other family members or lived hand-to-mouth; notably, the most frequent response for pre-program income was “₹0.” These figures confirm that the program successfully reached economically vulnerable youth who stood to benefit enormously from improved earnings.

Post-Program Income Increase: After completing the training and getting placed in jobs, participants’ incomes **surged**. The mean monthly income jumped to **₹14,227** in their current jobs. The salary increased at the mean level – an extraordinary rise that moved participants from ₹4,170 to a decent entry-level salary. In real terms, most trained youth are now earning between ₹10,000 and ₹20,000 per month. Such income gains are **transformative** for the youths’ households. Going from ~₹4.1k to ~₹14.2k means a trainee can now contribute substantially to family expenses, pay younger siblings’ school fees, or start saving for the future – things that were impossible before. One participant shared that after getting a job, *“I could start saving and planning for the future, which*

wasn't possible before,” underlining their new financial stability. Another said, *“I am now supporting my family... as my father cannot work,”* indicating that their income has become crucial to the household. In many cases, the youth’s salary is now among the highest income sources in their family; for some, it likely exceeded the entire previous household income. Program staff observed that participants from very low-income families have become important earners, significantly reducing economic strain on their families.

Household Income and Financial Inclusion: There is also a positive ripple effect on overall household finances and financial habits. Based on survey data, the median household income (combined family earnings) increased roughly from about ₹1,05,000 per annum before to ₹2,25,000 per annum after the program – implying that, on average, the trainee’s new income added ~₹10,000 monthly to the family’s earnings. While these absolute figures are modest, the relative change is significant for a low-income family – it could mean affording necessities, or being able to pay off debt faster. Over 90% of participants said their overall **financial situation improved** after getting the job. When asked about specific changes, 32% said they now have income *and* contribute more to the family and manage to save, another 18% cited higher income improving family support (even if not yet saving), and an additional 14% noted better financial planning and budgeting with their new earnings. Only a tiny fraction (4%) felt “not much changed” in their finances, typically those whose household had other earners and thus their income, while helpful, didn’t dramatically alter the total family income.

In sum, the program has had a **financial impact**: it has lifted a cohort of youth from joblessness or instability into regular, formal income, thereby improving not only their economic status but also contributing to their families’ financial security. This boost in income indicates the program’s effort to reach out to economically underprivileged youth.

C3: City-Wise Analysis: Distribution and Outcomes

The STeP Youth Skilling Centres operate in multiple cities. Our sample included program participants from six locations: Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Pune, Hyderabad, and Mumbai. Analysing outcomes by city helps assess if location influences effectiveness or if any centre outperforms others. The results show a high degree of consistency in success across cities, with only minor local variations. **Figure 7** below presents the median starting salary for each city in the survey sample:

Median Starting Salaries in Indian Cities

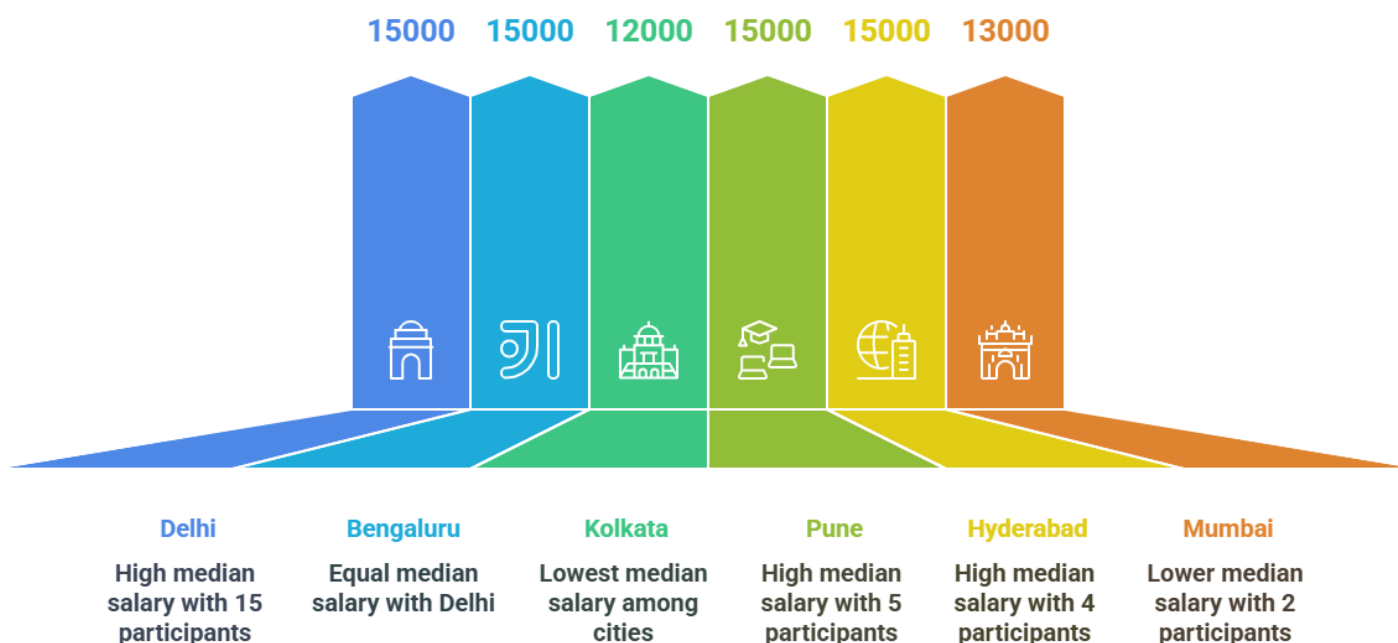


Figure 7: City-wise Median Starting Salary

Median starting salaries were in the ₹10k–15k range in most cities. Delhi and Bengaluru were on the higher end (₹15k median) and Kolkata slightly lower (₹12k), reflecting local market wage conditions. Mumbai’s two cases also fell in that range (~₹13k). **Breaking down by city category:**

Delhi & Bengaluru: These two metros together accounted for the majority of surveyed trainees. Delhi had 15 respondents and Bengaluru had 15. Participants in Delhi secured jobs across sectors, with a slight skew towards BFSI and Retail – aligning with Delhi’s abundance of banks, corporate offices, and malls. Bengaluru, India’s tech capital, saw more IT/ITES placements (e.g. BPO and tech support roles), alongside retail jobs in the city’s large malls. Average starting salaries in Delhi and Bengaluru were among the highest, around ₹15,000 per month median. Both centres have strong employer linkages: for example, major retail chains and banks regularly hire from Delhi batches, while Bengaluru trainees benefit from the city’s thriving IT-BPO industry. One challenge noted in big cities was commuting – some Delhi trainees travelled long distances for training or work – but centres addressed this by scheduling classes at convenient hours and locations. Overall, Delhi and Bengaluru reflect both strong job market demand *and* effective program delivery on the ground.

Kolkata, Pune, Hyderabad: Kolkata had 9 respondents, a job in Kolkata spanned BFSI, healthcare, and retail. Median starting salaries were a bit lower (in the ₹10,000–₹14,000 range) in line with local industry pay scales. Still, Kolkata trainees expressed immense gratitude; for them, a stable job is highly prized in a city with fewer new private-sector openings. One Kolkata alumna placed as a hospital assistant noted that many of her peers (outside the program) are still jobless while she already has a good job – giving her a “head start” in life. Pune had 5 respondents, despite the small sample from Pune, it’s notable that this centre even trained and placed a few youths with

physical disabilities – for example, partnering with a company open to hiring persons with disability for office desk roles. This shows the program’s inclusive approach in action. Pune placements were a mix of IT/ITES and BFSI, reflecting the city’s growing IT park and finance sectors. Hyderabad (4 respondents) likewise had all 4 employed, mostly in IT/ITES and retail roles to fit the local economy (tech firms and a big retail/hospitality market in Hyderabad). The trainees from Hyderabad had outcomes on par with others; one noted overcoming initial English-language struggles through the training, demonstrating the program’s adaptability in a multilingual setting. Employers in Hyderabad appreciated STeP-trained youth’s soft skills and quick cultural adaptation.

Mumbai: Only 2 surveyed program participants were from Mumbai – one in retail and one in BFSI. Mumbai’s cost of living is high, and these participants commented that while their starting salaries (~₹12k–₹15k) are a good start, they aspire to earn more to live comfortably in the city. This suggests that in very expensive cities, the program might explore additional support (such as negotiating slightly higher entry-level salaries with employers or providing stipends during training) to ensure trainees can thrive post-placement. As the Mumbai centre scales up, it could tap into the city’s huge job market across finance, retail, and services. One employer partner in Mumbai suggested expanding training to suburban areas and diversifying course modules to cater to local industry needs – indicating that demand exists if the program grows there.

No Geographic Disparities: Overall, no city lagged in performance – every location achieved strong satisfaction and income outcomes. This uniform success implies that the program’s core approach is **robust and transferable** across different locations. It appears the centralized curriculum and standards ensure quality training everywhere, while local teams effectively engage employers in their area to place youth. Minor variations observed (like Kolkata’s slightly lower salaries or Bengaluru’s IT-heavy placements) align with known city-specific economic differences, not with any failure of the program. The evidence suggests that whether in a metro or a tier-2 city, STeP can deliver high impact as long as it remains responsive to the local job market (for example, focusing on IT roles in tech-centric cities, or ensuring bilingual trainers in regions where local language proficiency is needed).

In summary, the city-wise analysis demonstrates that STeP’s impact is **not confined to one geography** – it’s a scalable model that has delivered uniformly positive results in different Indian cities. The key to future growth will be to maintain adaptability – addressing city-specific needs (e.g. transportation support in metros, language support in certain regions) – while replicating the proven training and placement framework.

C4: Gender-Wise Participation and Impact

Strong Female Inclusion: Smile Foundation’s youth skilling program is notably gender-inclusive, with young women comprising **58%** of the participants in our sample. Program implementers indicated they adopted a “*gender-sensitive design*” – for example, conducting community outreach to encourage women to join, and ensuring the training centres provide a safe, welcoming environment for all. As a result, more than half the trainees are women, many from conservative or low-income backgrounds where women’s workforce participation is traditionally limited.

Equal Outcomes for Women: A key finding is that female participants performed *on par* with males on all outcome metrics. Placement rates for women were essentially equal to men, and both groups saw similarly significant income increases and job stability. Our data analysis found no gap in placement or salary gain by gender. This gender parity is a notable achievement, as in many skilling programs or workplaces women can face outcome disparities. Here, female-trained youth are earning and contributing just as much as their male peers. Employers also did not report any performance difference by gender – in fact, some hiring partners noted that the women hires are equally capable and often bring strong soft skills and diligence to their roles. This parity speaks to the program’s fairness and the supportive ecosystem that allows women to thrive equally.

(The table below further illustrates the gender parity in outcomes. Both female and male trainees achieved ~100% placement with similar starting salaries.)

Table 4: Starting Salary by Gender

| Gender | Participants | Median Starting Salary (₹/month) |
|--------|--------------|----------------------------------|
| Female | 29 | ₹16,000 |
| Male | 21 | ₹16,000 |

Both women and men achieved virtually 100% placement and similar median starting pay. This underscores that the program effectively supports **both** genders in securing jobs at fair wages.

Empowerment and Confidence Gains: Beyond the numbers, the impact on female beneficiaries has been profound in terms of personal empowerment. For many of these young women, STeP was their first exposure to a professional environment and the first time they stepped out of domestic roles into the workforce. Nearly all women surveyed reported greater self-confidence and independence after completing the program. They have not only gained jobs but also earned respect in their families and communities as working professionals. One female trainee shared that initially, her family was sceptical about her working in a mixed-gender environment (she got a retail store job), but after visiting her workplace and seeing her confidently assist customers, *“they became proud of her.”* This anecdote illustrates how the program is subtly shifting societal attitudes: families and even neighbours start viewing young women differently – as capable income earners – when they see successful outcomes. Implementers observed that in some cases, families that once might have pressured a girl to marry early are now supportive of her pursuing a career, thanks to the trust built by the program’s safe environment and proven results.

Breaking Gender Stereotypes: The program has also enabled participants to challenge traditional gender norms in career choice. Women trainees entered sectors like IT and BFSI which are often male-dominated in entry-level roles, while some men entered healthcare roles (e.g. as hospital aides or nursing assistants) which often see more female workers. By ensuring all trainees get equal training and encouragement, STeP produces outcomes driven by individual interests and talent rather than gender. For instance, female-trained youth in BFSI sales roles are excelling at pitching financial products – one young woman said that convincing strangers about banking products was intimidating at first, but the rigorous role-play practice in training prepared her well and now she *thrives* on the challenge. Conversely, male-trained youth in healthcare roles have

become compassionate patient caregivers, breaking the notion that caregiving is “only for women.” This cross-pollination of genders in non-traditional fields is healthy for workplaces and helps break down gender barriers in these industries.

Supportive Training Environment: A critical factor enabling these successes is the supportive training environment fostered by STeP. Centres provided a safe space with equal opportunity for all. As one participant described, *“The environment felt safe and it welcomed all genders.”* Female trainees did not feel out of place or disadvantaged during the course. The program also addressed practical needs: for example, classes were often held during daylight hours (important for women’s safety in some areas), and some centres engaged with families to reassure them about the program. This thoughtful environment allowed women to focus on learning without external worries. As a result, female participants could take full advantage of the training, leading to outcomes on par with their male peers.

In conclusion (for this section), the gender-wise analysis shows the program to be truly **inclusive and empowering**. It successfully brought young women into the economic mainstream – with outcomes equal to men’s – and delivered life-changing boosts in confidence and societal perception.

C5: Sector-Wise Job Placement Trends

Smile Foundation’s STeP program offers training aligned to four main industry sectors: Retail, BFSI (Banking, Financial Services & Insurance), IT/ITES (Information Technology & IT-Enabled Services), and Healthcare, in addition to core employability skills. The impact assessment examined how trainees from each sector fared in placements and what sector-specific trends emerged. The findings indicate that each sector-specific training track effectively led to job opportunities, though with some differences in the types of roles and remuneration. **Figure 8** summarizes the distribution of placements by sector and typical starting salaries:

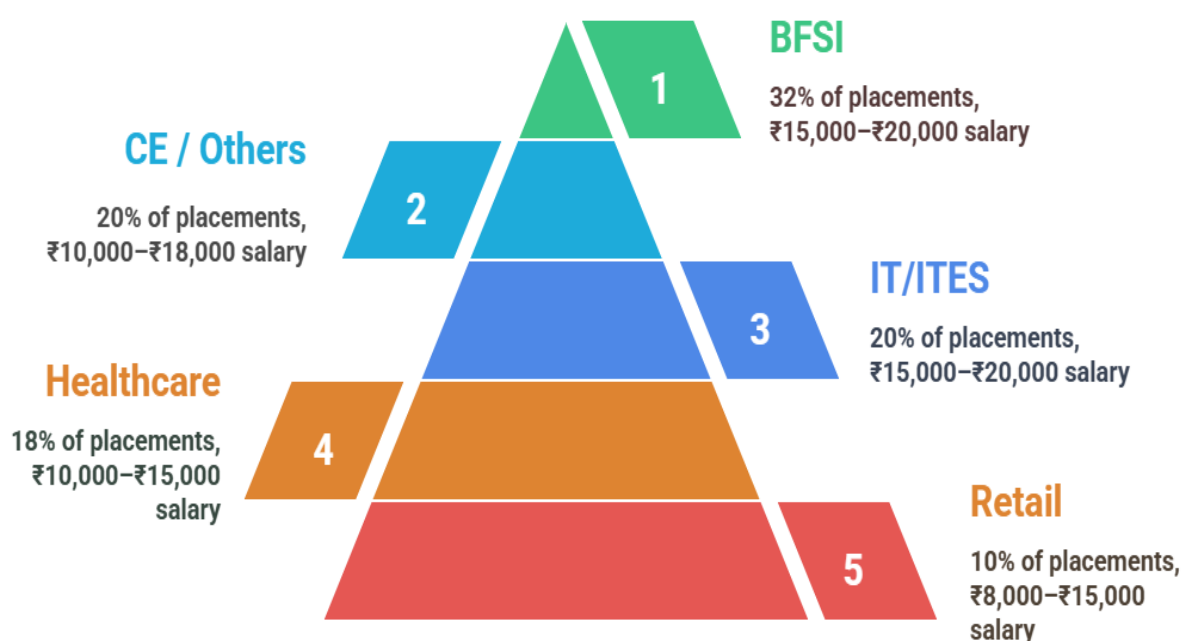


Figure 8: distribution of placements by sector and typical starting salaries

Distribution of Placements by Sector: Among the 50 program participants surveyed, the sample was spread across all sectors. Roughly 16 trained youth (32%) were from BFSI roles, ~10 (20%) were from IT/ITES, ~9 (18%) from Healthcare, and ~5 (10%) from Retail respectively. The remaining ~10 (20%) took on various other positions considering core employability (such as office administration, education, or training others). Below we highlight each sector track's outcomes and characteristics:

Retail Sector: Trainees who specialized in retail typically found jobs as sales associates or customer service staff in retail outlets such as apparel stores, supermarkets, and quick-service restaurants. All 5 sampled retail-track participants were successfully placed in the retail industry. An advantage in retail is the abundance of entry-level openings – many retailers hire continuously, so retail trainees often had job offers even before finishing the course. However, starting salaries in retail were on the lower side, usually in the ₹8,000–₹12,000 per month range (sometimes up to ₹15,000 in big metropolitan stores). Trainees understood this is a starting point; many reported that although retail salaries begin modestly, there is scope to grow with experience or shift to higher-paying brands. Some also mentioned that retail jobs offered other benefits like incentives/commissions for achieving sales targets, which could boost take-home pay. The program's curriculum prepared them for retail realities – e.g. handling customers, and operating billing systems – which helped trained youth adapt quickly. One challenge noted by retail trainees was dealing with difficult customers, but role-plays during training gave them the confidence to handle such situations. Going forward some trainees *suggested adding more digital skills (like basics of e-commerce or digital payments) to the retail course, as stores increasingly use those.*

BFSI Sector: The BFSI yielded the highest number of placements (16) and tended to offer roles with slightly higher starting salaries, averaging around ₹12,000–₹20,000 per month. Trained youth took up jobs such as Banking Sales Officers, Relationship Officers, loan processing associates, and insurance sales agents at banks, microfinance institutions, and insurance firms. A couple of trainees joined back-office roles in finance companies. BFSI positions often have a performance-based component; for instance, sales roles include incentives for meeting targets, which trainees find motivating. BFSI-trained youth reported that the professional communication and basic finance knowledge gained in STeP were invaluable – one trained youth said, *“I learned how to explain financial products to people who have no banking knowledge, which I do daily in my job.”* Employers in BFSI gave positive feedback, noting that STeP program participants were quick to pick up product knowledge and were comfortable approaching clients, thanks to their soft skills training. The BFSI sector roles generally have clear growth pathways (e.g. a sales officer can become a manager in a few years), and many BFSI trainees expressed strong ambitions to climb the career ladder. They now understand that their starting salary is a beginning and that they can grow to ₹25k+ with experience. In the survey, a minority of participants initially expected a higher immediate salary; the career counselling recommendation addresses managing such expectations by emphasizing incremental growth and strategies to achieve their goals.

IT/ITES Sector: The IT/ITES-trained youth (about 10 of them) typically found positions in BPOs (call centres), data entry, IT support, or other office-based roles in the tech/BPO industry. Bengaluru and Hyderabad contributed many of these placements, given their tech-oriented economies. IT/ITES roles had relatively higher starting salaries on average (often ₹15k or more), especially for technical support jobs requiring night shifts or specific skills. Trainees with better English and computer skills tended to land higher-paying BPO customer service jobs. A few others took IT technician or help-desk roles. The training's focus on basic IT skills, typing, and spoken English proved essential – trained youth mentioned that without STeP they would not have qualified for these jobs. One IT trainee who is now a data entry operator said the computer lessons helped him achieve the typing speed needed for his role. Employers in IT/ITES noted that while these youth are freshers, their familiarity with customer service etiquette and office software (from the course) gave them a slight edge over other raw entrants. As with BFSI, the IT program participants see scope for growth: some are planning to take further certifications (like advanced IT diplomas or programming courses) alongside work, an aspiration encouraged by their successful entry into the sector. Overall, the IT/ITES track placements underscore the importance of digital skills training; the demand for such roles remains high, and the program's inclusion of IT skills is yielding employment for the youth. Staying updated with industry trends like new software will be important, as noted in the Recommendations.

Healthcare Sector: Healthcare participants (~9 of them) trained for allied healthcare roles and found placements primarily in hospitals, clinics, and diagnostic centres. Common job titles included General Duty Assistant (GDA), patient care assistant, phlebotomy/lab assistant, and medical receptionist. All the healthcare-trained respondents obtained jobs in healthcare facilities. Starting salaries were in the ₹10,000–₹15,000 range, similar to retail, but many trainees were happy with the social value of their jobs. For example, one GDA said, *“I feel proud that I am helping sick people and doctors each day, even if my salary is not very high right now.”* The healthcare curriculum's practical components (like basics of patient care, first aid, and maintaining patient records) were highlighted as extremely useful on the job. Employers (hospitals) gave feedback that STeP GDAs were well-prepared in patient handling and hospital etiquette. An interesting observation is that healthcare jobs often have slightly longer working hours, which a few trainees found challenging at first, but they adapted over time. Importantly, this sector can offer stable employment; several healthcare program participants intend to continue in this field and possibly pursue further qualifications (such as a nursing course) while working. In conclusion, the sector-wise analysis shows a **balanced placement profile** with competitive starting salaries across industries, aligning with the program's goal to equip youth for various high-demand sectors of the economy.

Core Employability: The remaining 10 participants (~20% of the sample) found roles in diverse fields related to office administration, education, and training, reflecting the program's emphasis on core employability skills. These roles included administrative assistants, data entry clerks, front desk executives, teaching assistants, and vocational trainers. While salaries varied widely depending on the job and employer—typically in the ₹10,000–₹18,000 range—participants valued the stability and structured work environment these roles offered. Many highlighted that the program's focus on professional communication, workplace etiquette, and basic computer skills was instrumental in securing and excelling in their jobs. Placement Partners in administrative and educational settings appreciated the participants' readiness for workplace responsibilities, particularly their

ability to handle office software, documentation, and customer interactions. Some trainees suggested expanding the curriculum to include advanced MS Office skills and basic accounting knowledge to broaden job prospects further.

Analysis: The sector-wise placement trends from the Smile Foundation’s STeP program highlight its success in aligning youth with industry-specific job opportunities across BFSI, IT/ITES, Healthcare, Retail, and Core Employability roles. Each sector exhibited strengths—BFSI offered clear career growth paths, IT/ITES roles had higher initial salaries, healthcare provided stable employment with social impact, and retail ensured quick placement despite lower starting pay. Core employability placements reinforced the value of transferable skills across diverse job roles. However, certain gaps and areas for improvement emerged. Retail trainees suggested the inclusion of digital skills such as e-commerce and digital payment systems to keep pace with industry shifts. Similarly, BFSI participants benefited from soft skills training but needed better pre-placement salary expectation management to avoid initial dissatisfaction. IT/ITES placements underscored the growing need for advanced certifications, highlighting an opportunity to incorporate more specialized digital skills into the curriculum. Healthcare trainees faced long working hours, suggesting a need for career counselling on work-life balance and potential growth pathways in the sector. Additionally, those in administrative and educational roles recommended integrating advanced MS Office and basic accounting skills to enhance job readiness. Addressing these gaps through curriculum expansion, career guidance, and industry-aligned skill development can further improve program outcomes, ensuring sustained employability and upward mobility for participants.

C6: Job Satisfaction, Career Awareness, and Skill Development

Beyond tangible outcomes like jobs and salaries, the assessment also explored qualitative dimensions of the program’s success – specifically, how satisfied the youth are in their jobs, how the training affected their career outlook and skillsets, and feedback from stakeholders on the program’s quality. The findings show that trained youth are not only employed, but **thriving**: they are happy with their jobs, feel better equipped for future growth, and have significantly improved their confidence and soft skills. **Figure 9** highlights some key outcome indicators in these areas:

As shown, every trained youth surveyed is satisfied with their job, and virtually all found the training useful. All participants feel more aware of their career path post-training. Employers, for their part, are unanimously satisfied with the quality of STeP hires.

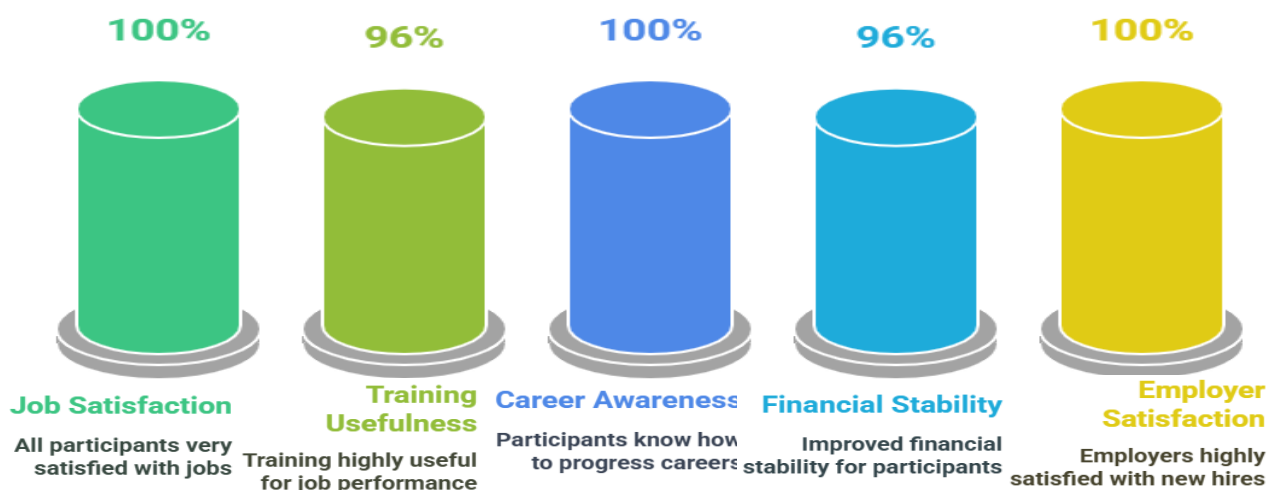


Figure 9: Key Post-Program Satisfaction and Progress Indicators

High Job Satisfaction: All indications point to an exceptionally high level of job satisfaction among the placed youth. **100%** of respondents said they are satisfied with their current job, with a majority (~56%) being “*very satisfied*” and the rest “*somewhat satisfied*.” Remarkably, none of the surveyed program participants expressed dissatisfaction with their job placement. This is a powerful endorsement of the program’s job matching and preparation process. It suggests that the roles and companies where trainees were placed are generally meeting their expectations in terms of work environment and growth opportunities. In interviews, participants gave reasons for their satisfaction such as: “*I am treated with respect at work,*” “*The job is exactly what I trained for,*” and “*Now I have a stable routine and income.*” The alignment of jobs with their skills and interests is a key factor – because placements were in relevant sectors, trainees could adapt and perform well, leading to high job contentment. Several also mentioned that simply having a formal job (often the first in their family) gave them a sense of pride and purpose, which contributed to their overall satisfaction. Notably, job satisfaction here reflects both *liking* the work and the quality of the placement; the program has been successful in partnering with decent employers that treat entry-level staff fairly, as evidenced by the high contentment levels.

Perceived Usefulness of Training & Career Awareness

Trained youth overwhelmingly felt that the STeP training was crucial in helping them succeed in their jobs, with 94% agreeing that it provided the skills necessary for their current roles. Additionally, 96% rated the training as “*useful*” or “*very useful*”, reinforcing the strong relevance of the curriculum to real-world job requirements. Participants shared examples of how specific course modules directly benefited them—such as a retail associate applying customer service techniques to handle difficult customers, an IT support trainee leveraging basic hardware knowledge to troubleshoot technical issues, and a BFSI sales executive utilizing pitching techniques learned in training to engage clients. While the training was largely well-received, some participants suggested enhancements, including more advanced Excel training, spoken English practice, hands-on exercises, extended course duration, and improved placement support.

Beyond skill acquisition, STeP broadened participants' career aspirations by increasing their understanding of professional growth opportunities. 76% of participants reported feeling “a lot

more aware” of career progression, with the remainder also acknowledging at least some increased awareness. Many entered the program without a clear career plan, but through training, they gained insights into promotions, sector-specific growth paths, and the skills needed for advancement. For instance, trainees in retail learned about transitioning into managerial roles, while healthcare-trained youth considered further certifications such as nursing. Many set new career goals, with some planning to pursue further education while working, and others aiming for promotions to leadership roles. This shift from simply seeking a job to strategically planning a career path is a key indicator of the program’s lasting impact.

Skill Development, Soft Skills & Stakeholder Satisfaction

Beyond technical skills, soft skills and professional grooming emerged as standout benefits of the program. Trainers observed a significant transformation in many introverted participants, who became confident communicators by the end of the course. For example, trainees with limited English proficiency were able to converse comfortably in basic English by graduation—an essential workplace skill. Employers noted that STeP-trained youth often outperformed other freshers in adaptability, workplace etiquette, and eagerness to learn. One hiring manager remarked that STeP hires were punctual, well-groomed, and had strong interpersonal skills, directly attributing this to the program’s grooming and etiquette sessions. These qualitative gains in communication, teamwork, and problem-solving were widely praised by both implementers and employers, reinforcing the holistic impact of the training.

From a stakeholder satisfaction perspective, 80% of placement partners were “very satisfied” with the program, while the remaining 20% were also satisfied. Employers appreciated that STeP-trained youth, despite being freshers, needed less onboarding and had a clear understanding of workplace expectations—a testament to the program’s job-readiness focus. Similarly, implementers expressed high satisfaction, particularly emphasizing the transformation they witnessed in participants’ confidence and professional attitude. The strong alignment between training, industry needs, and participant growth has built a solid foundation of stakeholder trust, further validating STeP’s effectiveness as a scalable model for youth employability.

In summary, the findings on satisfaction and personal development are **positive**. Beneficiaries (Program Participants) are satisfied in their new jobs, which indicates the placements are good quality and aligned with their skills. They found the training extremely useful and feel better prepared for the working world. Their aspirations have grown, and they now envision upward mobility.

Section D: Recommendations

The impact assessment findings indicate that Smile Foundation’s STeP Youth Skilling Program is impactful. To build on this success and ensure sustainability and scalability, we propose a set of strategic recommendations. These recommendations are aimed at enhancing the training quality, strengthening industry linkages, improving pre- and post-placement support, scaling the program to reach more youth, and updating the curriculum to stay ahead of market trends. Implementing these suggestions will help take the program from great to truly outstanding, amplifying its impact nationwide.

1. Enrich and Continuously Update the Training Curriculum: To maintain high relevance, the curriculum should continuously evolve and deepen.

- **Add Practical & Advanced Modules:** Incorporate more hands-on training and real-life simulations into each course. For example, include additional role-play exercises for sales (handling difficult customer scenarios), practice sessions on actual or simulated retail POS systems, and mini-projects or internships for each sector. In BFSI, integrate modules on digital banking and fintech basics; in IT, add content on commonly used new software or troubleshooting techniques. Offer *optional advanced content* for key skills – e.g. advanced Excel and data analysis for BFSI/IT trainees, a short caregiving practicum for healthcare trainees, etc. These steps respond to stakeholder feedback for more “learning by doing” and will reinforce skills through practice.
- **Continuous Curriculum Review:** Establish an annual curriculum review process with input from employers, trainers, and program participants. Industries change fast; a yearly review can identify emerging in-demand skills (such as digital marketing in retail, updated regulations in finance, or new customer service tools) and incorporate them into the program. Consider forming a standing *Industry Advisory Council* (comprising representatives from partner companies in retail, BFSI, IT, and healthcare) to advise on content updates. Regularly refreshing course material will keep the program future-ready and aligned with market needs, ensuring trained youth remain competitive as job requirements evolve.
- **Customized Learning Paths:** Introduce optional “add-on” specialization modules for those who want to deepen certain skills. For instance, after finishing the core training, a trainee could opt for an extra 2-week module in an area like advanced IT support, tally/accounting software, or spoken English fluency. This flexible approach lets ambitious students gain additional expertise without overloading the base curriculum. It caters to varied proficiency levels – faster learners can push further, while others focus on mastering fundamentals. Such modular upskilling opportunities would enhance employability for those aiming higher (an idea suggested by some participants who wanted more depth in specific topics).

2. Strengthen Pre-Placement Preparation and Career Counselling: Although placement outcomes are excellent, providing extra support just before job entry (and immediately after) can improve long-term success and satisfaction.

- **Intensive Interview & Job Readiness Coaching:** Enhance the pre-placement phase with rigorous interview preparation, resume-building workshops, and job search guidance. Ensure each trainee goes through multiple mock interviews with detailed feedback. Involve HR professionals from partner companies to conduct some mock interviews or Q&A sessions – this gives trainees exposure to real interview scenarios and expert tips. Also include sessions on workplace etiquette, professional communication, and time management as the transition to work approaches. This intensive coaching will boost confidence, especially for those who may face several interview rounds. It addresses any last-mile gaps (for example, a few trained youth noted they felt nervous in actual interviews despite having the skills; more practice can alleviate that).
- **One-on-One Career Counselling:** Provide individual career counselling or mentoring towards the end of the training. Each student should meet a counsellor or mentor to discuss their career interests, set realistic job/salary expectations, and plan their next steps. This personalized guidance helps align placements with each trainee’s strengths and goals, improving the chances of job satisfaction and retention. It can also manage expectations – for instance, if a trainee hoped for a higher starting salary, the counsellor can explain typical entry-level pay in their field and map out how they can grow to that higher salary with experience. Such mentorship ensures that trained youth make informed decisions and enter jobs with the right mindset.

3. Establish Post-Placement Program participants' Support and Tracking: The impact shouldn’t end at placement. Creating a program participants' engagement system will help track long-term progress and provide ongoing support.

- **Program participants Network and Mentorship:** Set up a formal STeP program participants network or association. This can be a platform (even a simple WhatsApp or Facebook group initially) where new program participants can stay connected with the program and with each other. Organize quarterly meet-ups or virtual sessions where program participants share workplace experiences, successes, and challenges. Invite successful program participants as guest speakers for current trainees to serve as role models. Within this network, facilitate a mentorship program where seasoned program participants (1-2 years into jobs) mentor newer trained youth, offering advice on navigating the workplace or career growth. A program participant's network not only fosters peer support but also builds a sense of community and loyalty to the program, which can be beneficial for referrals and spreading the word.
- **Career Progress Tracking:** Implement a system to periodically check in on program participants (for example at 6 months, 1 year, 2 years after placement). This can be through brief surveys or calls to gather data on their job stability, any promotions or salary increases, further education pursued, etc. Tracking these metrics will help demonstrate long-term impact (e.g. how many stay employed or move up) and identify if any post-training interventions are needed. For instance, if a significant drop-off in employment is observed after a year, the program could introduce follow-up support or refresher training. In our findings, many program participants were doing well one year on, which is great – tracking will ensure this continues and will flag anyone who might need help (perhaps connecting them to new job openings if they became unemployed, etc.).

- **Continued Skill Development Opportunities:** Use the program participants' network to offer ongoing learning opportunities. This could be short workshops (online webinars) on advanced topics, free access to online courses, or information about government skill programs that program participants can tap into. Showing that STeP's support continues after placement can improve program participants' satisfaction and outcomes. It also encourages program participants to become ambassadors of the program in their workplaces and communities, creating a virtuous cycle of support and recruitment.

4. Deepen Industry Partnerships and Placement Opportunities: Expanding and formalizing partnerships with employers will help in curriculum relevance and in securing job opportunities for future batches.

- **Industry Advisory Council:** As noted earlier, form an advisory group of key hiring partners from each sector (retail, BFSI, IT, healthcare) who meet perhaps twice a year. Their input can guide curriculum updates, suggest emerging job roles to train for, and even collaborate on things like internships or on-site exposure for trainees. When employers have a stake in shaping the training, they are more likely to hire trained youth consistently.
- **MOUs with Employers for Hiring Commitments:** Work towards signing Memorandums of Understanding with companies that regularly hire entry-level workers, to create a pipeline. For example, a retail chain could agree to interview every STeP-trained youth in that city; a hospital network might reserve a certain number of openings for STeP trainees each year. While not binding, these agreements formalize the relationship and give trainees prioritized access to opportunities.
- **On-the-Job Training & Internships:** Introduce short internships or on-the-job training stints in collaboration with industry partners. Even a 2-week internship at the end of the course can greatly enhance a trainee's experience and CV. Some willing companies might host trainees for practical exposure (for instance, a bank could allow trainees to shadow employees, or a store could take interns on the shop floor). This not only boosts confidence and skills but often leads to job offers if the intern performs well.
- **Placement Drives and Job Fairs:** Organize dedicated placement drives or mini job fairs at the end of each training batch, inviting a range of employers to come to interview the graduating trainees. This can increase the visibility of STeP in the industry and give trainees more options to choose from. It also streamlines the hiring process. Several employers together can create a healthy competition to hire the best trainees, potentially improving salary offers. For instance, if two BPO companies both want the top IT trainee, the one providing a better package may get them – benefiting the youth.
- **Employer Feedback Loop:** Continue to gather structured feedback from employers about past hires at regular intervals (e.g. 3 months after hiring a trainee, ask the employer how the person is performing). Use this feedback to refine training and also to report back to employers on actions taken, closing the loop and strengthening trust that the program is responsive to their needs.

5. Scale Up Strategically to New Locations: With the program model proving effective, there is an opportunity to expand STeP's reach to benefit more youth, including in underserved areas. However, scaling should be strategic to maintain quality.

- **New Centres in High-Need Urban Areas:** Identify additional cities or large towns with high youth unemployment where STeP can make an impact (for example, cities in states not yet covered). Develop a scaling plan to open new training centres in those locations over the next few years. Leverage learnings from current centres to standardize operations. For each new city, start with a needs assessment and build local industry connections in advance (perhaps via the networks of current corporate partners). Ensure the core team for new centres is well-trained or includes experienced staff relocated from existing centres to transfer the program culture.
- **Rural Outreach via Mobile Units or Partnerships:** Considering the success seen with rural youth who came to cities, explore models to take training closer to rural communities. This might involve mobile training units (e.g. a “classroom on wheels” van equipped with laptops) that travel to villages or partnerships with existing rural institutions (like community colleges or NGOs) where STeP modules can be delivered. Piloting STeP in a semi-urban or rural setting could test the adaptation of the model. Notably, our findings showed rural-origin youth doing as well as urban ones once given access to training, implying the model can work if delivered. Creative approaches like satellite centres in small towns, or digital classrooms streaming content from city centres, could be tried.
- **Use of Technology for Wider Reach:** Invest in e-learning platforms to complement physical training. For instance, develop an online learning portal or mobile app with STeP course content, quizzes, and videos. This can be used in blended learning at centres (improving learning quality and consistency) and eventually for remote training of youth who cannot attend in person. An online platform also enables scaling to more students without being limited by physical infrastructure. It can host program participants refresher courses too. While hands-on practice is crucial, parts of the curriculum (like theory, and soft skills sessions) might be effectively delivered or reinforced online, increasing efficiency.
- **Maintain Quality with Growth:** Ensure that expansion does not dilute the program’s effectiveness. This means securing adequate funding and resources so that trainer-to-student ratios remain good, facilities are equipped, and content stays updated. Create a robust Training-of-Trainers program to rapidly hire and prepare new trainers who uphold STeP’s standards and values. Implement internal monitoring for new centres (e.g. frequent audits, and performance reviews) in the initial years. Essentially, treat scaling as *scaling the impact with fidelity*, not just scaling numbers. A phased approach (pilot, evaluate, then expand) will help maintain the high outcomes observed so far.
- *Urban vs. Rural Reach:* It’s worth noting that while the surveyed sample was predominantly urban (centres are city-based), about 26% of participants hailed from rural areas or small towns and had come to the city to attend the program. These rural youth performed **just as well** as their urban counterparts in placements and earnings – in fact, no significant outcome gap was seen based on hometown. This suggests that the program, if extended to more rural areas, could replicate similar success. It underscores an opportunity for expansion: many rural underserved youths could benefit if such training centres or mobile training units reach their regions (an aspect addressed in the Recommendations).

By implementing these recommendations, Smile Foundation's STeP Youth Skilling Program can **enhance its already impressive outcomes and scale up its reach** without losing effectiveness. The suggestions above directly address the improvement areas noted by stakeholders (such as adding more practical training, updating the curriculum continuously, providing pre/post-placement support, and expanding access). They also leverage the program's existing strengths – for instance, deepening industry ties builds on the strong employer satisfaction already present. With careful execution, these enhancements will help ensure that STeP remains a leader in youth skilling, adapting to future needs and touching many more lives.

Section E: Conclusion

The Smile Foundation's STeP Youth Skilling Program has demonstrated a significant and positive impact on enhancing employability among marginalized youth. The program effectively bridges the gap between education and employment by offering industry-aligned vocational training, equipping participants with critical skills, and ensuring successful job placements. The impact assessment highlights several key strengths of the program while also identifying opportunities for further refinement to enhance long-term employability and scalability.

Key Positives:

- **High Placement Rates & Sector Relevance:**
 - Achieved near-universal job placement, with over 90% of trained youth securing employment in Retail, BFSI, IT/ITES, and Healthcare sectors.
 - Strong job-skill alignment, ensuring that training directly translates to relevant employment opportunities.
- **Transformative Income Growth:**
 - Significant increase in participants' income post-placement, with median earnings rising from ₹1,500 to ₹15,000 per month.
 - 96% of trained youth now contribute more to their families' financial well-being, improving household livelihoods.
- **Inclusive & Gender-Equitable Outcomes:**
 - Women achieved equal placement rates and salary levels as men, with improved confidence and social acceptance.
 - The program successfully facilitated gender inclusion, with women entering traditionally male-dominated sectors and vice versa.
- **High Job Satisfaction & Career Awareness:**
 - 100% of trained youth reported job satisfaction, with 56% "very satisfied."
 - 76% of participants gained greater career awareness and set long-term growth aspirations.
- **Industry & Employer Validation:**
 - 80% of hiring partners expressed high satisfaction with the performance and preparedness of STeP-trained youth.
 - Employers recognized strong soft skills, professionalism, and industry-specific competencies among trained youth.
- **Scalability Potential:**
 - The program's proven model is adaptable across different urban and semi-urban areas.
 - Its success in diverse geographic locations suggests the feasibility of expansion, including rural outreach.

Areas for Improvement & Recommendations:

- **Curriculum Enhancement:**
 - Incorporate more hands-on training, real-life simulations, and advanced digital skills.
 - Introduce modular specialization tracks for deeper expertise in BFSI, IT, and Healthcare.
 - Establish an annual industry advisory council to ensure curriculum updates align with market trends.
- **Pre-Placement Support:**
 - Strengthen interview preparation with multiple mock interviews and HR-led training sessions.
 - Implement one-on-one career counselling to better align job expectations with industry realities.
- **Post-Placement Engagement & Career Growth:**
 - Develop a structured alumni network for mentorship and continuous learning opportunities.
 - Establish career progress tracking to monitor long-term employment retention and upward mobility.
 - Introduce refresher courses and workshops to facilitate career progression.
- **Stronger Industry Partnerships:**
 - Expand employer collaborations through MOUs for hiring commitments and internship opportunities.
 - Introduce on-the-job training models and exposure programs to enhance job readiness.
 - Organize periodic placement drives and job fairs for better employment outcomes.
- **Scalability & Rural Outreach:**
 - Develop satellite training centres or mobile learning units to reach underserved rural youth.
 - Leverage digital tools to expand program accessibility beyond urban areas.
 - Ensure quality control mechanisms in new training centres to maintain program effectiveness.

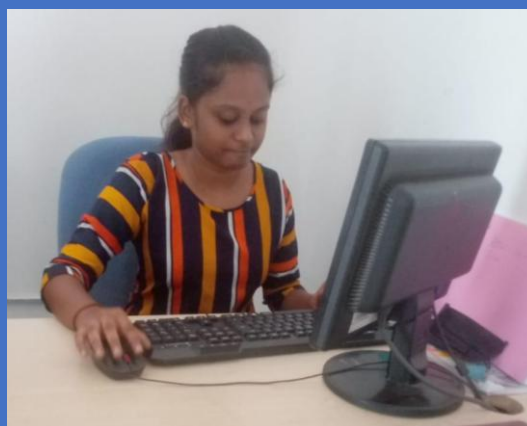
The STeP Youth Skilling Program stands out as a highly effective and scalable solution to youth unemployment in India. It successfully empowers marginalized youth by providing them with sustainable employment, financial independence, and career progression opportunities. With near-universal job placements, transformative income growth, and strong employer satisfaction, the program has established itself as a model for youth employability initiatives.

However, as the job market evolves, continuous improvements in curriculum, placement support, post-placement engagement, and industry partnerships will be key to maintaining and expanding its impact. By strategically implementing these enhancements, STeP can further strengthen its role as a leader in skill development, ensuring that even more young individuals transition into meaningful and sustainable careers.

Annexures: Case Stories

K. Maheswari: A Journey from Struggles to Success

| Attribute | Details |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Name | K. Maheswari |
| Location | Hyderabad |
| Age | 28 |
| Course Duration | Nov 2023 - Feb 2024 |
| Qualification | Graduate |
| Salary Before | None |
| Salary After | Rs. 17,500 |
| Current Job | Personal Loan Processor |
| Employer | Manappuram Gold Loan |



Background and Challenges:

Maheswari, a 28-year-old from the Rasoolpura slum, Hyderabad, belonged to a financially struggling family of five. Her father worked as a labourer, earning Rs. 8,000 per month, while her mother managed the household. With two younger sisters studying in a government college, Maheswari felt immense pressure to contribute financially. Despite completing her degree, she faced constant job rejections due to a lack of industry-relevant skills, leaving her frustrated and hopeless.

Transformation through STeP:

Everything changed when a Smile Foundation volunteer introduced her to the BFSI course at the Society for Solidarity and Reconstruction Centre. Encouraged by her family, she joined the training program on **1st November 2023**. Through a well-structured curriculum, mock interviews, and career counselling, Maheswari gained technical knowledge and confidence. The facilitators recognized her potential and encouraged her to believe in herself.

Achievements and Growth:


After completing the course in **February 2024**, Maheswari secured a job at **Manappuram Gold Loan** as a **Personal Loan Processor**, earning **Rs. 17,500 per month**. This opportunity marked a turning point, allowing her to uplift her family's financial condition and focus on career growth. She now aspires to grow within the BFSI sector and provide a better life for her family.

Her Words:

"The support I received immensely helped me for a better future. It gave me the essential skills and knowledge to break into the BFSI industry, combining both theory and practical training. The career counselling sessions also helped me find a clear direction in my career path. A ray of hope has arisen for the future, and the hopeless situation has changed, enhancing my confidence to achieve more in life."

Mary Harshitha: Overcoming Financial Struggles with Determination

| Attribute | Details | |
|-----------------|------------------------|-----------|
| Name | Mary Harshitha | |
| Location | Bangalore | |
| Age | 27 | |
| Course Duration | Oct 2023 - Jan 2024 | |
| Qualification | B.Com | |
| Salary Before | | |
| Salary After | Rs. 15,000 | |
| Current Job | Customer Service | Executive |
| Employer | Kosamattam Finance Ltd | |



Background and Challenges:

Mary Harshitha faced hardship after her father's passing, leaving her mother as the sole breadwinner, and working as a tailor. Despite earning a B.Com degree, financial constraints and a lack of job-ready skills made it difficult for her to find employment.

Transformation through STeP:

Determined to change her situation, Mary enrolled in the BFSI training program in October 2023 at the STeP centre. The training provided her with in-depth knowledge of banking, financial services, and insurance, while career counselling and personality development sessions enhanced her confidence and communication skills.

Achievements and Growth:

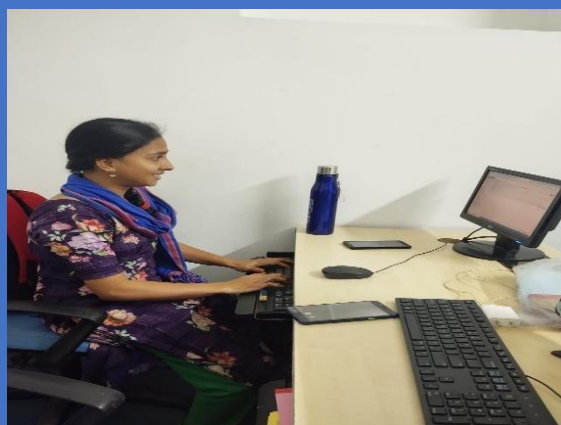
Mary successfully secured a position at **Kosamattam Finance Ltd** as a **Customer Service Executive**, earning **Rs. 15,000 per month**. The job has given her financial stability and enabled her to support her mother and brother.

Her Words:

"The BFSI course has been truly transformative, enhancing my skills and boosting my confidence significantly. I am deeply grateful to Smile Foundation and Flipkart Foundation for this life-changing opportunity that has empowered me with valuable knowledge and expertise. This experience has set a solid foundation for my future endeavours, and I am excited to apply these newfound skills in my journey ahead."

R. Gowthami: Breaking Barriers and Achieving Financial Independence

| Attribute | Details |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| Name | R. Gowthami |
| Location | Hyderabad |
| Age | 24 |
| Course Duration | Nov 2023 - Feb 2024 |
| Qualification | Graduate |
| Salary Before | None |
| Salary After | Rs. 18,750 |
| Current Job | Associate |
| Employer | PrimEra |



Background and Challenges:

Gowthami, a 24-year-old from Hyderabad, belonged to a family struggling to make ends meet. Her father, a daily wage labourer, earned Rs. 9,000 per month, barely enough to support the family. Despite earning a degree, she found herself unemployed due to a lack of skills relevant to the job market.

Transformation through STeP:

Gowthami enrolled in the BFSI training program at the Society for Solidarity and Reconstruction in November 2023. She learned technical skills, participated in career counselling, and underwent mock interviews that helped build her confidence.

Achievements and Growth:

Upon completing the course, Gowthami secured a job as an **Associate at PrimEra**, earning **Rs. 18,750 per month**. This role has given her financial independence and an opportunity for career advancement.

Her Words:

"I never thought I would achieve such a milestone. I was hopeless and lacked the skills needed to succeed. The four-month BFSI course gave me the confidence and skills to support my family and significantly improve our standard of living. I am incredibly thankful to Smile Foundation and Flipkart Foundation for providing me with this new, better life."

D. Rajitha: A Journey from Financial Struggles to Stability

| Attribute | Details |
|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Name | D. Rajitha |
| Location | Hyderabad |
| Age | 28 |
| Course | Nov 2023 - Feb 2024 |
| Duration | |
| Qualification | Graduate |
| Salary Before | None |
| Salary After | Rs. 15,333 |
| Current Job | Trainee – Life Planning Officer |
| Employer | Reliance Nippon |



Background and Challenges:

Rajitha, a 28-year-old woman from the Adikmet area in Hyderabad, lived with her husband and two children in a rented house within the Ramnagar slum. Despite having a degree, she struggled to find employment due to her responsibilities at home and a lack of relevant skills. Her husband, a contract helper earning Rs. 9,000 per month, was the sole breadwinner, making it difficult to meet their family's basic needs. Determined to support her husband and improve their financial stability, Rajitha sought opportunities to develop employable skills.

Transformation through STeP:

In November 2023, Rajitha enrolled in the BFSI training program offered by Smile Foundation's STeP initiative in partnership with Flipkart Foundation. The training provided her with essential knowledge in banking, financial services, and insurance, along with personality development sessions. Her enthusiasm for learning and active participation helped her gain confidence and improve her job readiness. The facilitators at the centre recognized her potential and helped her prepare for job interviews through mock sessions and grooming workshops.

Achievements and Growth:


After completing her training in February 2024, Rajitha attended an interview with Corporate but was not selected. However, she remained determined and applied to Reliance Nippon, where she secured a position as a **Trainee – Life Planning Officer**, earning Rs. 15,333 per month. This job has provided her family with much-needed financial stability, and she is now focused on growing in her career. Grateful for the training and support she received, Rajitha is optimistic about her future in the BFSI sector.

Her Words:

"Never expected a 4-month course would help my family live a better standard of life. I first gained confidence that I can achieve in my career, and I am heartily thankful to the Flipkart Foundation for creating a ray of hope for a better standard of life."

Sumanth B: From Uncertainty to a Promising Career in BFSI

| Attribute | Details |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Name | Sumanth B |
| Location | Bangalore |
| Age | 22 |
| Course Duration | Oct 2023 - Jan 2024 |
| Qualification | B.Com |
| Salary Before | None |
| Salary After | Rs. 18,500 |
| Current Job | BFSI Sector - Gold Loan Officer |
| Employer | Manappuram Gold Loan |



Background and Challenges:

Sumanth B, a 22-year-old from Sonnenahalli Grama in Bengaluru, Karnataka, faced significant financial struggles. His father, an auto driver, worked long hours to support the family, while his mother managed the household. With two younger siblings still in school, the family's financial burden was immense. Despite earning a **B.Com degree**, Sumanth found it difficult to secure a stable job due to limited skills and confidence. He felt pressured to contribute to his family but lacked proper guidance on career opportunities.

Transformation through STeP:

In October 2023, Sumanth came across a **Smile Foundation BFSI training program** through a friend and decided to enrol at the IPDP Centre. The training provided him with technical skills in banking, financial services, and insurance, along with soft skills development and career counselling. The program helped him improve his communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and confidence in handling job interviews. For the first time, he felt prepared to enter the workforce and make a difference in his family's financial situation.

Achievements and Growth:

After completing his training in **January 2024**, Sumanth secured his first job as an **Assistant Accountant at Bharath Traders**, earning **Rs. 18,000 per month**. However, after five months, he decided to switch jobs due to work pressure and took up a position at **Manappuram Gold Loan**, where he now earns **Rs. 18,500 per month** with additional performance-based incentives. His new job provides financial stability, and he is actively supporting his siblings' education and improving his family's living conditions. Sumanth now sees a clear career path in the BFSI sector and is determined to keep growing.

His Words:

"The support I received was truly life-changing. It gave me the essential skills and knowledge to break into the BFSI industry, combining both theory and practical training. The career counselling sessions were a huge source of motivation, helping me find a clear direction in my career path. With this support, I gained the confidence I needed to secure a job in the BFSI sector. I am now on a path to achieving my career goals, something I once thought was out of reach."

Will available data be suffice to provide inferences?