
Quest Alliance: Learning How to Learn

Abstract

Quest Alliance began its organisational journey as digital technology was about to unfold sweeping changes in India, including in the areas of education and employment. As if to symbolise its tryst with technology, it is nestled in India's "silicon valley" city of Bengaluru. Today, it also happens to enjoy the patronage of an enviable list of marquee donors ranging from leaders in the financial services industry and information technology to multilateral development agencies and Indian Government. Over the course of its work with these partners, Quest Alliance¹ has come to serve as an interesting node in the arena of skill development and operates at the intersection of education, technology and youth employment.

Established in 2005, it started as an earnest but modest enterprise. From 2009—when it had seven people and a sudden crisis of funding at hand—till 2022, it saw rapid acceleration. By the end of 2022, it had a team of 234 handling over INR 62 crore worth of annual funding. What Quest was working on—"Enabling self-learning"—was highly topical and certainly aided its growth, but amidst this growth something unusually remained steadfast: the extent of its investment on learning, development and capacity building of its own team. This holds significance for civil society where sourcing and building talent is a continuous pre-occupation for leadership.

The case engages with the journey of Quest and its founder Aakash Sethi, and explores what it takes to put in place the internal scaffolding to hold together this deliberate and sustained focus on self-learning and development of its own people. It also engages with Quest's work towards evolving a model of talent-building of young people in schools as well as those in transition from education to employment: anchored in the notion of young people as self-learners equipped with 21st century skills. The latter part of the case explores how Quest has crafted its own people management practice around the "self-learner" and gives learners the opportunity to reflect on the challenges of building and maintaining a way of being, doing and relating in a rapidly growing organisation.

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¹ Also referred to in this case study as Quest.

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Origins

It was the last day of summer vacation, in 1995. Fourteen-year-old Aakash Sethi had spent the summer having fun, playing with friends and going to inter-school cricket matches, where he would keep score and be the ball boy. He had never really enjoyed attending school and was the happiest when missing his classes and going off to the nearest playground. That day, however, he was extremely nervous. He knew he had done badly in his final exams. The very thought of the next day—the first day of school after vacation when he would receive his report card—filled him with apprehension. The next day, the dreaded sheet of paper confirmed his worst fear. It read, “You are detained in class IX.” Aakash recalls:

There was a lot of chaos within me as well as concern from friends and extended family. That was tough, because as we all know, in India, failure is always looked down upon in some sense or the other. However, my parents kept calm and gave me an option to continue studying in the same school in 9th grade or go to another school and join the next class. Surprisingly, I decided to stay because I loved my school too much to go elsewhere. The focus on stories, songs and sports from my headmaster (in building a vibrant culture) played an instrumental role in shaping my affinity towards these activities. Of course, my friends had moved to the next class which gave me an opportunity to make new friends. I knew a bit of the curriculum, and had a lot of time to explore new opportunities such as graphic design and basketball. Basically, I was doing more than just academics. By the time I was in 10th grade, I had become a national basketball player and also managed 75% in academics, enough to fall under the category of a decent student. (Shashidhar, 2018)

Aakash’s childhood and adolescence were also the time when he was introduced to issues of social development and to civil society, where several of his family members worked. His father was an activist,

who ran an NGO advocating for the land rights of scheduled castes in Maharashtra and building capacity of other, smaller civil society organisations. Recalling the role models in his family as a youngster, Aakash shares:

My maternal uncle was a deputy municipal commissioner of Ahmedabad and worked on government reforms. My aunt ran a school which had a huge positive influence on me...Some (family members) were involved in promoting art and culture while others provided shelter through low-cost housing projects. I was surrounded by people breathing and talking the language of creating social impact. From a young age, I was exposed to community events such as Women's Day and Environment Day. Spending time in different organisations, understanding their mission, activities and the process of operational execution was a big part of my life, growing up. Apart from family, as any other basketball lover, I was an admirer of Michael Jordan. (Shashidhar, 2018)

Noting her son's interest in basketball, Aakash's mother encouraged him to enrol at St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, where he could take up the sport as a potential career, alongside his major degree in Economics. It was here, over the period 1999–2002, that Aakash got involved with AIESEC, a youth leadership movement that engaged youth from around the world through travel, conferences and cross-cultural experiences (refer to Exhibit 1). For a young Aakash, membership in AIESEC was a turning point in life. He reflects:

I started volunteering (with AIESEC), which worked on social responsibility, cultural understanding, entrepreneurial mindsets...As a result of that, I started training, I started facilitating, I started leading peer groups and that experience was quite powerful: to be a youth animator, to be a youth facilitator. And I believe, at that point, when I was about 19, I decided that I wanted to work on issues related to youth and that's what triggered the larger journey that I'm currently on (2021), and that [time with AIESEC] was the formative stages of the journey. (School Radio, 2015)

As part of this time with AIESEC, Akash went on cultural exchanges around the world, including places such as South Africa and Japan. Meeting like-minded people from around the world was a big source of inspiration. It instilled in him a belief in the self-learning potential of youth and a curiosity to explore this further. In particular, he had come to believe that every individual was inherently motivated to learn and was searching for appropriate means and media to channelise it.

The turn of the millennium was also a time of hope and rapid change: in particular, the change brought about by the acknowledged onset of the digital age. It was also a period that saw globalisation expand at a pace unseen in the recent past. In turn, the world of education and employment was rapidly changing. In such a context, Aakash realised that youngsters able to centre themselves in their own learning journey and build their own learning pathways would most be able to adapt and thrive. By tapping into this learning potential, young people could grow into self-learners prepared for a lifelong journey of learning and career shifts.

But it all came together when, as part of his international sojourn, Aakash eventually came to Istanbul, Turkey, in 2004. In Istanbul, he started working with Microsoft as a Corporate Citizenship Coordinator. He reminisces:

In Istanbul I was working with Microsoft (Middle East and Africa) and learning about how technology could be used to empower youth, for quality education as well as for employment and job-readiness. That's where I think, the very early stage of an idea was born, especially when I met with the International Youth Foundation (IYF) while thinking about starting something in India. With some of the ideas that I had around youth employment and quality education, I happened to be at the right place at the right time and convinced IYF to have me help them start their India office. In the first three years of Quest Alliance, we operated as the India office of IYF. (School Radio, 2015)

Quest Alliance

Aakash elaborates on the idea which he was trying to give form to as an organisation:

We start with (the) self. We believe at Quest that the “quest” starts within. And so, who am I? I'm a young person, with my own confusions, my own explorations of different ideas and different identities. Oftentimes, growing up, you're told you have to become this one person, so you're constantly trying to be that one person. But you are many people, in one. So in that sense, I'm continuously seeking clarity on my future.

If we look at any young person's journey in navigating their lives, they are really trying to make sense of their learning ecosystem. Their own parents, their peer groups, their work environments. A learning ecosystem really comprises all these different influences. The learner, who is at the centre; facilitators, who are trying to change the lives of learners; learning institutions, who are providing learners with the learning environment to really thrive and grow; and the community—the engaged community of people who can support this journey. A young learner has to make sense of their lives really by making connections, building relationships, having self-awareness, solving problems they face in everyday life, as well as by sharing their stories with others to continuously grow and learn. That's really the idea that we believe in—that a learner can drive their own learning journey, as long as they can make meaning through these relationships. (Meraklis, 2020)

The intent was to design an organisation that would, at its core, enable a young person in education or a young adult transitioning to employment, to transform into a self-learner able to drive their own lifelong journey of learning and working. Self-learning was also seen as a way to move past the hierarchy and power associated with traditional teacher-student relationships towards more equal and meaningful relationships that could enhance the learning process: enabling young people to make choices about what they learn, how they learn, the pace at which they do so, and how to use that learning to impact the world around them (Quest Alliance, 2019). Capturing this, the newly founded Quest Alliance's vision was stated as: “Enabling individuals to build self-learning pathways to make meaning of their lives.”

In tune with the times

Quest's vision finds a very real connection to a formidable challenge that successive Indian governments have wrestled with in the modern era, with little success: a chasm between the skills demanded by the nation's economy and job markets and those that young people leave the formal education system with.

The Future of Jobs report by the World Economic Forum (2016) noted that around 65% of children entering primary school will end up working in jobs that do not currently exist, and that in many countries and sectors, the most in-demand specialisations and occupations of today did not exist 10 years ago. Updates to classroom curricula can no longer keep pace with the rate of change of developments in industry, technology and shifts in the employment landscape today. Young people leaving formal education thus increasingly require the ability to learn continuously and adapt to stay relevant throughout their careers.

India has one of the largest labour forces in absolute size, at around 563 million people at the end of 2020 (PIB Delhi, 2020). Further, according to the fifth National Family Health Survey (2019-21), 52% of the total population of the country was under the age of 30 (Express News Service, 2022). Put together, these figures have often been used in the context of a huge "demographic dividend" waiting to be harnessed (MSDE, 2021). However, multiple reports have pointed to a significant skills gap that underlies these headline figures. Chiefly, the paucity of a highly trained workforce and the lack of employment-readiness of conventionally educated youth were noted in the National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015, as possessing "little to no job skills" (refer to Exhibit 1).

According to a strategy report prepared by Quest Alliance in 2017, the problem of India's skills gap is further complicated by the fast-changing "technological landscape," both in India and around the world, which has the effect of shaping and influencing the skill sets and opportunities required for young people to have thriving lives and careers (Quest Alliance, 2019).

Finally, Quest's report observed that existing government-led skilling programmes and initiatives are "predominantly oriented towards sector-specific technical or vocational training," and that while these skills are important, "they are not broad-based enough to adequately prepare for technology-led disruptions to the future of work." Thus, as physical and virtual spaces of work become increasingly intertwined, the report emphasises the need for a core set of skills that are holistic and interoperable: able to sustain multiple career pathways.

21st century skills for the self-learner

Thus, the other element of Quest's founding philosophy was that growing into a self-learner, on its own, was not enough to nurture a lifelong learning journey. It was equally important to identify and equip the growing learner with a particular set of foundational skills which would enable them to connect to and apply themselves within the context of their choosing. In the vocabulary that the young Quest Alliance was developing, these skills were known as "21st century skills" (refer to Exhibit 2). As Aakash emphasises, these skills were not specific to any particular thematic sector or job role:

We believe that young people growing up in India really need to learn 21st century skills. These are skills of self-awareness, problem-solving, being able to tell stories, communicate, being able to make sense of all the information on careers, on different opportunities, as well as learn to plan your career path, learn to learn in a digital world. These, we believe, are the future of

the 21st century, for a young person to succeed. (Meraklis, 2020)

These core skills, applicable across the entire higher education and employment spectrum, would help sustain different types of meaningful careers in the modern work environment, and help a young person stay relevant in multiple fields of the job market.

In its strategy report, Quest identified four key barriers which interact to deny young people “the awareness and possibilities of emerging as 21st century learners and thriving with dignity, especially in resource-poor communities.” These are deficits of leadership, development, social capital, and knowledge and skills. Leadership deficits pertain to the lack of opportunities for youth to transform their own lives and lead change in their own communities. The development deficit refers to a lack of understanding within government institutions and other ecosystem players as to how the existing skills gap can be filled. Further, according to Quest, educators and organisations promoting the development of 21st century skills for youth do not have a platform or an industry body for representation and for increasing influence in society, resulting in a social capital deficit. Finally, the deficit in knowledge and skills refers to the approach of existing education and skilling institutions, which by and large do not put the learner at the centre or seek to build self-learning in individuals (Quest Alliance, 2019).

Reflecting on the shifts required in education and skilling to overcome these deficits, Aakash shares that:

When we were growing up, we had to be know-it-alls. We had to pass exams and read things. Now, the shift is going to be from know-it-all to self-learn it all. Because of the fast-changing nature of work and fast-changing environment, we (at Quest) are seeing that self-learning and letting go of ego—from saying: this is how much I passed in exams, these are the marks I got, to saying: these are the ways I learnt, upskilled myself and influenced other people—is going to be the measure of success. So, given that this is going to be key, what is the role of learning ecosystems? The role of education systems is really to hold the “being” and the “doing” of individuals, of learners. (Meraklis, 2020)

The importance of the space: self-learning environments

To bring together a vision of individuals as self-learners equipped with 21st century skills, the last element of Quest’s founding vision emphasised the importance of the space in which this journey unfolded for each individual. Aakash continues:

Therefore, we really believe that we need to create a learning space. The learning space is an environment that allows young people to grow in the four spaces of family, friends, community and school (or work). So the creation of a learning space is really at the heart of what we do. It is to create that enabling environment for young people to grow. And those spaces are shrinking right now, and young people are not succeeding. That’s because young people are learning to pass exams. The focus on assessment-based systems is failing our young people so much. We’ve almost created a factory model of learning, a factory model of education where different people are entering the system but the ones who are coming out all look the same. The learning spaces that need to create

diversity, create inclusive ideas, do not really exist. We are in the industrial age of learning. (Meraklis, 2020)

Quest's vision was instead of "learning ecosystems." For Quest, these learning ecosystems would be differentiated from the spaces found in traditional schooling and higher education systems in terms of: consisting of a blend of physical and virtual learning environments; learners being able to access, evaluate and build their own learning pathways; an early focus on self-learning and building 21st century skills; educators able to take on the role of mentors and facilitators; and the creation of inclusive learning environments which would infuse a "joyful" spirit to the process of learning.

These key elements informed the design of Quest Alliance's early programmes, as well as the earliest building blocks of the organisation's own internal culture and identity. Aakash underscores:

Coming to who we are, who Quest is, what we really try to do... We are really here to develop young people as self-learners so that they can thrive, have strong social and economic empowerment, have more agency to make choices, and find what they want to find. We do this by working with and transforming various learning ecosystems. These learning ecosystems could be schools, secondary schools, ITIs, or vocational training institutes. (Meraklis, 2020)

The aim was not to replace existing learning institutions and educators. Rather, through Quest Alliance, Aakash and his team were attempting to reimagine learning spaces to be able to support the development of a "nation of 21st century learners and facilitators," who would be ready for the future of education and the employment landscape in India (Quest Alliance, 2019).

The "Alliance"

It was no small goal for a young non-profit. But how would it attempt to go about scaling such a peak? For Quest, its fundamental approach lay encapsulated in the second part of its name. It would do so by forming a coalition of the willing: an "alliance," as Aakash elaborates:

How do you really create education technology-enabled models that can be scalable, especially in terms of developing 21st century skills for young people? A lot of proof-of-concepts which exist in the field—but which do not address cross-cutting needs—have been in terms of: how do you use ed-tech (education technology) in a meaningful way? Secondly, the private sector, civil society and the governments don't necessarily work together to solve problems and collaborate. So, the idea of the "Alliance" is to be able to bring these different actors together, so that they can learn and solve problems collaboratively, rather than in their own respective spaces.

It's been a three-pronged strategy: of direct work, of partnerships with government and civil society, and of transferring knowledge at scale. So, from a numbers perspective, we are talking about reaching about 4 million young people by 2024 and doing that by working actively with about eight state governments. Right now, the idea is to work deeply with these 18 different state governments [in 2022] across various areas. Some

governments want to work with us on ITI (Industrial Training Institutes). So, for example, we have a partnership with the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, where we are looking at all the 2.5 million learners in ITIs, to make sure that all the ITI learners, from a future perspective, have 21st century skills. This is kind of a national partnership. And then we are working in various states to develop master trainers, to create access through the master trainers directly to teachers and learners, and to develop 21st century skills. So, that's on the youth side where we work with ITIs.

The second is in terms of the schools space, where we work closely with a certain number of state governments, again, on integrating 21st century skills curriculum and teacher training in their schools. So, we work closely with states like Karnataka, Jharkhand, Telangana, Gujarat. There it is also to develop a model for 21st century skills, where it's not just about young people consuming digital content, but also becoming creators of digital content. So, how can they also use digital tools to solve everyday problems that they see?

The realisation that self-learning mattered deeply for modern youth had come to crystallise itself at an intersection of education, technology and youth employment-readiness. Quest's interventions, directed at this intersection, sought not to erect new edifices, but to address the problem within multiple levels of the existing ecosystem: partnering with institutions and stakeholders throughout the spectrum of schooling to employment. As of 2022, Quest Alliance was working with one central government partnership, 22 funding partners, 32 civil society partners and 18 state government partners (Quest Alliance, 2022).

Quest's early days: a testing time

Back in 2009, however, when the IYF mandate first ended, Aakash, together with his young and now fully independent organisation, was faced with the first major challenge. The departure of IYF had resulted in a severe drop in overall funds and the team was facing a 50% pay cut. It was a tough test for the early team. Would they weather the storm and hold the incipient Quest Alliance together? As Sylvia Priyanthi (Director, People and Operations at Quest) shares, between 2009 and 2010, the answer was far from a given:

We had to decide whether to close down or take the big, risky step of continuing as an independent organisation. The core team who were there at that time, they took this decision of continuing the work, mainly because the research we had been doing indicated that a lot of work needed to be done in the field; they didn't just want to give up and close down.

Securing funds and new projects were the need of the hour, and the newly independent Quest Alliance threw itself into its work. An opportunity soon arose with USAID, which had been supporting research studies that Quest had been a part of during its association with IYF. For the team enduring a difficult transition and as yet unconvinced about the meaning and potential of Quest's work, the partnership brought much-needed validation. Sylvia recalls:

We partnered with them to work in Samastipur (Bihar) and that was a very big moment for us because when we moved (to our own offices) in 2010, we only had funding from Accenture, who were mainly interested in

working with youth in vocational training institutes, helping them prepare for 21st century careers. That was the only funding we had, so people did take huge salary cuts from being an IYF employee to becoming a Quest employee because it was a huge difference from being an international NGO staff member to becoming a startup employee. But it was a conscious decision which people took, and [the USAID partnership in] 2012 was the open door for us to go back to the school space. So, I would say this period was one of the most significant for us. We went and started working in Bihar, doing exhaustive research on understanding what are some of the gaps and also to strengthen the education system by developing a model to help students return to school.

The outcome of its intensive work in Bihar was its flagship programme—Anandshala—which continues till date. Anandshala aimed to motivate children to attend and remain in school by transforming school environments into joyful learning spaces central to Quest’s founding vision. Since its launch as a pilot in Samastipur in 2012, the programme has been implemented with 4,65,000 students in 996 schools across Bihar and Jharkhand, and has demonstrated an average attendance increase of 9% in the students it works with. Refer to Exhibit 3 for an overview of Quest’s other programs.

The pilot project served to instil a sense of confidence in the small, seven-member team. Invigorated and energised, between 2012 and 2016, it was a time of much productive churning and ideation within. Sunita Saini (Learning and Development Manager at Quest) captures the echo of that sentiment:

The team was very, very small. I don't know the exact number, but around, I think, six or seven people at that point but growing in numbers. But, I think in terms of the temperament of the team, a lot of them had taken pay cuts and it was a conscious decision for many people who started Quest to come together to take this forward. At that time, everybody was doing everything: it was a lot about implementation, it was a lot about how we build relationships with the people that we wanted to work with in the government space and trying to figure out a lot of those aspects which many people were even new to at that point. So, the team was really coming together and figuring out what all needed to be done. Apart from that, there was a lot of ideation around what we should do in the youth and employability space. What's the work we can do around building skills and competencies of educators themselves? By the end of 2015, we had about 50–55 people all together. We grew as the programmes grew and we started doing work in the Bihar area and started work in the middle school space as well. So, there was a lot of new work that was happening and a fair amount of research and learning as the team was going along.

At the same time, a growing group of people and work was starting to give Quest a much clearer sense of its own identity. It was no longer just the “Indian office of IYF.” With a measure of funding stability and a growing body of work, it started more fully turning its attention within. Aakash recollects:

Here, the challenge was to share all the previous experiences in a way that every new member looked at Quest’s journey as their own journey, to engage each member to inculcate the values of the organisation, to visualise

and act towards the organisation's mission as their own, hence creating a connect and striving towards a common goal.

As we were growing, sometime around 2010 to 2012, it was critical to build a group of leaders, at least 10 to 12 leaders, who were continuously learning, reflecting, understanding the organisational mission and vision, and also passing that on to their teams. There was also a lot of investment in bringing the entire organisation together once in a year to live the organisational values through doing things together, through exploring concepts together—what does it mean to “integrate”? What does it mean to “emerge”? How can we learn from nature and get inspired by living systems rather than complex machine metaphors and hierarchies that we tend to create? So, we did have a very strong focus on bringing people together to experience organisational values. While the leadership team of 10 to 12 people were coming together to understand growth, change management, co-creating the vision and mission, we also brought the organisation together as a whole system, to also understand what the whole organisation looks like, and to do things which helped the organisation get inspired by nature, and get inspired by the values of nature, and to apply it in our practices.

A few years into its journey then, a number of important factors had converged: Quest's founding vision; the information technology boom in India in the 2000s; and the national demand for employable youth with a relevant set of skills. There was soon a significant demand for its programmes, and it added several highly reputed technology companies and multinational corporations to its growing list of donors (refer to Exhibit 6). In parallel, fundraising at Quest also became increasingly distributed across organisational levels. Crediting his colleagues, Aakash spells out that this approach has been partly responsible for Quest's success at raising funds over the years:

Being able to build a funding pipeline and being able to grow in building funder relationships, I think, is a critical part of any road to scale. That's an area where we have grown from 3 to 4 funders to 18 (22 in 2022) funders, from a mission capital of about 70 lakh to about 52 crore (62 crore in 2022) in donations and in grants, and being able to do this with some of the most innovative companies across the country. That has been a cornerstone to building something, and, I think, of building a culture where it's not just one or two people who do fundraising. It's a range of different people where everyone plays a different role in building funder relationships. So, there's a big role in culture-building with respect to fundraising inside organisations. Otherwise it ends up being only a few peoples' jobs, and that can create a different kind of tension which may not be very successful. (Meraklis, 2020)

As it endeavoured to instil self-learning in the students it worked with in its programmes, Quest was at an important juncture. It was time to look systematically within and lay the foundations of an internal culture that would build a sense of belonging and collective purpose for its many new staff members. Just prior to 2016, Quest had 60 full-time employees. Between 2016 and 2018, the staff strength nearly doubled to 115. It was the biggest spurt of growth the organisation had experienced until then.

Seeding a “way of relating”

During this period, the entire gamut of internal functional verticals, such as human resources, finance and IT, along with monitoring and evaluation (M&E), were handled in a more informal and organic way by a small working group known as the Programme Support Unit.

In response to the rapid growth, the single Programme Support Unit was divided into individual verticals, one of which formed in 2018 as the People team, was dedicated to Quest’s cultural and people practices. On the face of it, these changes seemed routine: a young organisation finding its feet, growing fast and handling this growth internally with more formal practices. However, underneath the surface, Quest was busy going right back to its foundations, bringing together its entire team of over 100 people in an organisation-wide co-creative exercise. Sylvia reflects:

If we look at the history of the organisation itself, Quest has always believed in each individual and always saw each individual as part of a whole, not as somebody who is just there to contribute towards their roles and responsibilities and then leave. How could each person contribute to creating the big picture? The organisation revolved around trying to understand this, especially in the beginning part of our journey of setting up Quest. The core team, that is, the early group of people who had come together to set up and work on Quest Alliance, had seeded this ideology across the organisation and so, throughout the organisation, we still believe in the approach of co-design and co-creation.

In 2018, when we revisited our strategy we also realised that our values, which we had developed in the early phase of our journey, were not fully speaking to the present context. We took up an organisation-wide exercise where we listened to people to understand what it is that stands out for them, and if they were able to call out what stood out to them about our values. We drew everything together and that’s how our current set of values were developed. First we listened to everyone’s voices, then we shared a summary of what had been heard with everyone, and then a lot of group processes were initiated to arrive at a consensus, and everybody, the entire organisation, signed off on our present values.

Approved by the entire team of over 100 people: “Being compassionate,” “Fostering collaboration,” “Living with courage” and “Continuous learning” became Quest Alliance’s new set of values. This exercise had a visible and lasting effect throughout the organisation. Sylvia continues:

For values to come alive, people have to remember them. They have to come up organically in our contexts, in our conversations, and in the way we approach our work. Values should be visible, not just some phrases to memorise and repeat. In that sense, some of our earlier values were not really coming out in the open, not so visible in our work and in our everyday lives at Quest. So that’s when we felt that maybe it was time we relooked at our values.

Since then, after this [organisation-wide] exercise, and because everybody was engaged in looking at these values, they come out everyday in our conversations. For example, one of the values, “Continuous learning,” is coming out so well now: when teams talk about their work, when

individuals talk about their performance, about how they are listening to others and how they are looking at and evaluating themselves. These days, when we look at a programme design, we are not just looking at how we have delivered, but what we have learnt from that experience. That is something that has been coming out very well in our everyday practices.

“Being compassionate,” another of our values, has directly influenced our hiring and recruitment practices, and led us to have a lot more conversations on how we celebrate our diversity. “Living with courage” plays out everyday by encouraging a flat organisation, where anyone can approach anyone, ask questions and share any inputs that they may have. The other element is that we don’t shy away from experimenting. Quest is known in the sector for innovation, like testing new technologies, looking at collaboration in different ways, et cetera. and so, we don’t have the fear of failing. Along with successes, we share our failures with each other openly. That’s also part of living with courage.

Bringing together what was by then a sizable organisation for an exercise like this was a huge investment of organisational time. But it was only the first step to systematise itself better, especially as Quest started to spread to several new locations. Starting in 2016, it opened up offices and began operations in Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Assam.

Moderating hierarchies

Nikita Bengani (Director, Youth Programs at Quest), a Quest team member for nearly 13 years (as of late 2021), has witnessed its entire story of growth and change. During this time, she has worked in a large number of different roles; everything, in her words, from “strategy, to fundraising, to programme management, to content, technology, training, and some HR contracts when we were much smaller in size.” Speaking from her vast experience of life at Quest, she points to a particularly significant shift in organisational structure that allowed it to maintain a close-knit, collaborative culture despite its rapid spread and increase in team size:

We had a previous structure [in the early days], with six or seven people who were pretty much managing everything in the programme. And then a lot of it depended upon what they had the bandwidth for, and what they cared for more over other things. So, in some sense, I think, from a culture building perspective, just separating out these lenses from each other, one allows more people to be in the space of anchoring and leadership, which then allows a more equitable distribution of power dynamics and hierarchies and slightly flatter structure, which leads to less of a culture of hierarchy and power. That was one aspect.

The other thing, I think, just from a mindset perspective, and from a culture perspective, not believing that somebody who's a project lead and has access to budgets and donors is the only one who's holding a lot of the decision-making. Instead, to be able to redistribute some of that, and really bring out some of the other voices in the forefront: that's why we focus on experience-building as one of the things to go deeper with our work. It's not always important to just do more numbers, for example.

So, some of these other voices have also started to come into the programmes, which has allowed a lot of the softer elements to come in: more voices, more people having a say in decisions. I think collaboration has become a lot easier. With this networked structure, you can also understand: "who are my counterparts in different spaces, and different states who are doing similar work in another geography?" So, having that be more visible allows for a lot more cross-sharing, cross-learning, people spending time with each other and with their teams, with different geographies, different regions, et cetera. Some of those things have been made possible I feel with the new networked structure. I do feel that structure to a large extent has a bearing on how people want to feel about their roles.

I think restructuring really helped us. For me, when I viewed this programme from the outside before we did the restructuring, it just felt like a big jungle, a big forest with so much happening, but not knowing who to go with for what, and who to get the full picture from, or who do you collaborate with and for what; all of that. So, I really struggled with some of those things. There were other similar things: like people had no clue what's going on in another state, in another geography, in another team, within the larger programme. With the (networked) structure, we have now streamlined these four or five meeting points, collaboration points, and shared spaces, where different people, different teams, different anchors from these lenses come together regularly and share. So, the structure has led to a lot more transparency and visibility I feel.

As its internal population of self-learners grew across its nationwide locations, Quest started to focus more deeply on developing "professional pathways": facilitating individuals in its fold to learn, grow and develop in a way of their own choosing. The challenge was, as Sylvia puts it, "So, if we were to go and reach outside with our programmes, how are we looking within? How are we learning and growing and creating those pathways for people to learn and grow in the organisation?" As in its programmes, so too inside the organisation, the learner had to be at the centre of the act.

Reach for the Stars

Sylvia shares:

In 2016, we realised that we should move more closely to helping individuals to identify their essence: what the individual essence is which lies in each person. And once an individual is able to discover their essence, then they don't need any other assistance and then they will be able to drive their own journey, whether it's within Quest or outside Quest. So, in 2016, we came up with a programme called 'Reach for the Stars', which was a co-created process where we involved employees in the design of the process. And in this, the main principle was that the individual was at the centre of whatever he or she or they do: how they are looking at their growth, and what their individual aspirations are. So, it's not even talking just about growth, but also what their aspiration is in life in the broader

frame, and then helping that individual find the connect with their team roles and the connect with the organisation. It's a three-level approach.

In spirit and in design, Reach for the Stars served as the foundation of performance assessment and management at Quest Alliance. The idea was not to create a “rule book” of performance but to develop a practice of performance management in which the employee, as a self-learner, was able to set their own goals, call out and access any form of upskilling that they needed, and align the wider vision of their own lives with the goals and priorities of the organisation (refer to Fig. 3 of Exhibit 4). Thus, the Reach for the Stars program also doubled as a form of training, where employees learned how to set wide-ranging career and personal goals.

Over a third of Quest's staff came together and engaged with the co-designing of Reach for the Stars. This inclusive process built significant ownership for the programme across the organisation, and was a strong motivator for individuals to take up the programme, setting and working towards their own goals, and growing alongside the organisation in the ways of their choosing. Reach for the Stars also earmarked a fund of Rs. 10,000 for each individual in the organisation to use for any aspect of learning that they wanted to take up, such as attending workshops, courses or learning new skills.

This freedom to use the fund to explore any avenues of learning and development of interest in itself presented a challenge, especially in the early days following its introduction. With teams in different locations and performing a wide variety of roles, an open-ended personal development fund appeared vague. It was not immediately clear to most how to use such a fund to advance in a particular direction. Responding rapidly to this feedback, the programme was quickly recalibrated, as Sylvia points out:

So, we took up an exercise where we tried to identify what the skills are that need to be built among people to make it (Reach for the Stars) more meaningful. We identified four key areas which we need to work on and then we came up with a core competency framework to help people to understand: if they're at a particular level, what will be the next set of skills that they need to develop and so on. And that helped people to see what it was that was in front of them, and also to plan more effectively. It also helped the line managers help their team members when they were visualising their journey, to give them that concrete input.

With Reach for the Stars, Quest's spend on its team notably accelerated. In the year 2015-16, just prior to the design and launch of Reach for the Stars, it was spending around INR 35,000 yearly on each of its 60-strong team under the category “Training and Workshops,” no small measure of sum even then. By 2017-18, when team size had nearly doubled to 115, this per capita spend had outpaced this increase, rising to INR 1.32 lakh per person. This figure remarkably kept outpacing its increase in team size. By 2019-20, with 173 individuals on board, it was spending INR 1.74 lakh per team member on learning and development (refer to Exhibit 6).

Through Reach for the Stars and this sustained investment in its team, Quest was looking to fundamentally reorient the way it understood performance. Performance assessment needed to be guided and shaped by its drive to develop its talent as self-learners. Measurement of an individual's progression as a self-learner was thus a key input into understanding their overall performance. But how to go about this? While it had targets and goals linked to its programmes, self-learning was a deeply personal experience to each person.

One of the steps it took was to discourage the conventional practice of time-based career progression, as Aakash lays out:

Oftentimes, from an Indian context, promotions and salary are the two biggest drivers for a young person entering the team. But for us, for example, what is equally important is: is that person invested in their personal growth and learning? Which means, have they enrolled and completed any online courses or any kind of personal growth labs that we internally promote or that our people go out for externally? That is an important principle—an individual's investment in personal growth and learning.

It's not a given that if you spend four years in a role without doing any of this, that you would get promoted, or that you would grow from point A to point B. You need to demonstrate that you have invested in that process. So, similarly, if you are in a certain role, are you giving time for, for example: thought leadership, personal reflections, learnings that are helping you articulate your learnings to your peers? And therefore, are your peers looking at you as not just a manager but also as a thought leader in your own respective space? So, for example: if you've written a certain amount of blogs, or you've put out a certain amount of your point of view in any form, that's another dimension (of performance) that we are currently looking at. There are these two or three things that are really important: continuous learning, thought leadership and enabling collaboration across the organisation. So, as a current articulation, these are things that have been guiding our performance management.

The organisation's rapid phase of growth from 2016 onwards, then, was matched by a determination to bring its people together, encourage personal learning journeys for each member and bring alive the "Quest spirit": the informal term used within to describe the relational, collaborative culture that aspired to build ownership for Quest and its work amongst every single person.

Building ownership: co-creating the Quest Way

Quest's insistence on listening to its people and its willingness to take drastic and wide-ranging measures in response to what it was hearing was a hallmark of its growth stage. Continuing, in 2018, along with its revision of core values, Quest also went back to the drawing board to update its organisational mission and strategy, bringing together the whole organisation to do so.

Holding multiple workshops across geographies and listening to the voices of both its internal and external stakeholders, the meticulous co-creative process culminated in its annual team meet in 2018, where the entire team "wove the mission of the organisation together." Sylvia reflects on its painstaking efforts to build this level of ownership:

I would say that even now, people who have remained with Quest from 2018 to 2022 still cherish those moments the organisation invested, because they felt that the organisation considered everybody's point of view and they felt the mission was co-drafted or co-created with them. Following that, we launched our first revised strategy in 2018.

Along with the revised strategy, the Quest Way, formally articulated in 2018, brought together, in a simple framework, Quest's approach to its work and to its people. The Quest Way is the point of reference for all individuals in Quest to understand its vision, mission, values and the practices it encourages within (refer to Exhibit 4). Simply put, the framework connects together Quest's "way of being" (the values and goals which guide it), its "way of doing" (its approach towards implementation to meet its goals), and its "way of relating" (the internal practices that form the basis of its culture).

The building of this cultural foundation, triggered first by the withdrawal of funds by IYF in 2009 and later by the onset of rapid growth, eventually had to meet certain expectations in terms of Quest's goals and objectives as an organisation. Quest's recognition that the "rubber had to also hit the road" found its voice in a five-year strategic plan released towards the end of 2018 (refer to Exhibit 7).

"Being who we are": culture and identity for scale

The goals laid out were ambitious. For instance, by the end of the year 2023 the organisation had set out for itself to: empower 4 million learners with 21st century skills (of which 1 million had to be adolescent girls in the age group 10–19); equip 50,000 educators/facilitators to catalyse their learning ecosystems with 21st century skills; and build a network of 5,450 schools, 750 ITIs and 200 civil society organisations. (Quest Alliance, 2019).

Goals, a result of logic and expressed in dry figures, seemed at an arm's length from the notions of individual self-learning, a shared cultural space, or for that matter the cultural openness required to innovate. For Quest, the challenge was that self-learning is full of vitality. Would the fulfilment of figures rob Quest's work of the very vitality it was trying to promote in the learning establishment? On the other hand, growth and expansion were perhaps a necessity: the issue was certainly urgent, the youth remained the largest constituency of the demographic and their world was certainly changing in many untold ways.

For Quest, recognising this tension was important. Its cultural foundation is finally to provide a central space where employees are able to find their own unique identity. Simultaneously and alongside, this foundation aspired to allow each individual to embark on their own self-learning journey as the organisation embarked on a scaling journey of its own. Aakash lays out what the scaling project required Quest to ask and answer for itself:

What makes us scale-ready? How do we scale impact? It's really by being who we are. By being that individual and having that space to learn. What really drives this team [at Quest] are a set of values...I think oftentimes in our journey of doing, and trying to figure out strategy and all the things that are more logical, we tend to forget the being. It is, I think, equally important to look at creating learning spaces within organisations so that people can experience the values, people can experience the being and also find one's own authentic values. I think that's been a critical piece for our growth, for people to take ownership of the organisation. More and more people who drive change in the organisation are leaders who are not necessarily the senior leaders but people who are on the frontline. So, creating a space for regularly changing, driving change and working with people who continuously talk about change.

These reflections could not have come a minute too soon. Quest's team strength, which stood at 115 at the end of 2018, nearly doubled again to 204 in 2021. This growth did overwhelm the ongoing efforts to consolidate its own thinking and the organisation grappled with how to make certain shifts in its articulation of core principles, values, as well as employee performance, to maintain consistent alignment in an organisation growing at such speed. Speaking in 2021, as the change was unfolding, Aakash captures the live conundrum:

Now suddenly, from four or five levels, we have 10 levels in the organisation. So, in a sense, we are going through a transformation, in terms of articulating principles as well where things like wellbeing, inclusion, belonging, equity are becoming more important, as much as, say, performance principles like continuous learning, managing collaborative work, et cetera. So, that's the kind of shift we are trying to articulate, while sharing the principles [with the staff]: those are some of the transformations that we are experiencing right now."

Something that we are currently revisiting is our people philosophy. Given the next stage of growth that we are in, how would we define our people philosophy which guides the actual decision-making, in terms of managers and leaders taking decisions around fairness, equity, inclusion, et cetera? So, I think one thing that's really important is "vibe." That's what we are calling it. Wellbeing, inclusion, belonging and equity. These are four words that actually create the right kind of environment, and atmosphere [at Quest]. So, these four become the key values. They become the guiding light for us to make decisions. Now, each of these can be opened up, but at a big picture level, I would say these are the four big priorities.

These questions also had to be framed against the background of increasingly dispersed operations. The spread of Quest's programmes into different states (starting with the Anandshala programme which was launched in Bihar and Jharkhand in 2012) led to the increasing decentralisation of its teams (refer to Exhibit 5). Towards the end of 2022, Quest Alliance had field offices in 15 different states (and Delhi NCR) (Quest Alliance, 2022).

Much of this second spurt of growth also happened to coincide with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which greatly restricted Quest's ability to bring its national teams together. Thus, while overall team strength almost doubled between 2019-21, the vast majority of the new hires were not able to experience Quest Alliance as a whole, especially in terms of unifying cultural elements across locations. Aakash estimated that at the end of 2021 nearly 60% of the team comprised those that had spent less than three years in the organisation—straddling the pandemic period—and thus had not been able to experience the spaces that Quest normally has in place for realising organisational values, for culture building and for encouraging retention and motivation: a challenge that would serve to animate Quest's journey to scale.

A cultural alchemy: fostering creativity and innovation

This challenge, of creating a shared space that promotes well-being, inclusion, belonging and equity, matters deeply to Quest for holding together a growing operation. But it also bears a close relationship to the essence underlying Quest's work: to enable existing learning ecosystems to re-tune and re-learn by bringing innovation and collaboration to state governments, partner civil society organisations and supporting philanthropic organisations. To do so requires a culture able to support and scaffold its people's

creativity, and the first step towards such a culture was the removal of the fear of failure. As Sunita highlights using an example, acceptance of and learning from failure is the prerequisite to an innovative culture at Quest:

I still remember this incident in 2018 where we were trying to innovate on a backpack model, with which you could charge laptops, devices, and have internet connectivity. It was like a bag through which you could get connected anywhere, anytime and we had a team who were working on it. We learned that some of these things were quite ambitious for the amount of budget. While we were developing it we also realised that some of the ideas we had and the things that we had planned could be done but it was not so cost-effective. For us, technology innovation has to be replicable and cost-effective, so even though we had a lot of people investing their time, we couldn't go with it. But what we learnt from that experience, we captured it and we still share it today. So, innovation is also about sharing stories of failures and helping people to think.

This culture of experimentation free from the fear of failure is wedded to a set of bespoke creative spaces. These spaces allow teams to rapidly come together to test new ideas and develop pilots, as Sylvia shares:

We also have working groups as a model in place where people who specialise in certain skills come and work on an organisational problem together. For instance, this year we are working on blended learning. Blended learning is something that we want to take to the next level because Quest has always been working on technology. So, who are these people who should come and work together? It should be the content people from the different teams who are developing content and also the technology team who are looking at tech-enablement to make that content work. We brought both these groups together and we also have representatives from the People team as a part of it, to help with how we take forward any new innovations as an organisational mandate and all that. That is how working groups are formed and this year, we are also trying to work towards developing our own understanding of inclusion and equity, so we have people across all levels in the organisation part of the working groups.

There is a specific technology innovation team within the organisation that works with all other teams to identify programme-level aspects of technology innovation and develops strategies to use technology for cost-effectiveness, efficiency, or to help the organisation connect better at the last mile. For instance, the team developed LearnPi, a low-cost computer able to deploy offline content in connectivity-constrained areas and integrate all the functionality of Quest App (developed from the globally used, open-source RaspberryPi platform). The design greatly reduced the cost of computer installation in rural areas (Quest Alliance, 2018). Nayan Moni Kalita (People Manager at Quest) further adds:

These spaces that have been created...for example, there is a space called the Geeks' Club, where we solution for some of the regular problems that the tech teams might be facing and also do things like hackathons. I think these spaces create the opportunity for personal learning and also for people to share problems with each other, and so a lot of ideas and solutions come out of these spaces. If someone has an idea or a way of

doing things which resonates with some work that I am doing, I am able to build on that idea to bring something new to my own work.

Quest also initiated a programme called Learnership. The Learnership program allows employees to take up personal projects that are primarily aligned to their own interests, but which also contribute to a particular organisational need, or to the needs of a particular programme vertical within Quest. As Neha Parti (Director, Schools Program at Quest) describes:

The whole idea was to build a culture of innovation within the team. That is, as people, how are we encouraging ground-up innovation based on observations that we're making, or insights and reflections that we're having? Can we convert them into quick pilots that we can do, and then see how it can be integrated back into the mainstream of the project work that is happening?

That's the idea with which Learnership was initiated. I think that's also a way for people to build their confidence in themselves, that: I've been able to work on my own idea, I've been able to convert it from an idea into some kind of a solution and present it back to a wider audience. And those also become ways to recognise people for their effort and the initiative that they are taking.

Finally, to bind this culture of innovation and creativity, Sunita emphasises the importance of bringing together all the different groups throughout Quest running innovative projects at various points in the year and continuously reinforcing mindsets of collaboration and the feeling of “being in it together”:

Last year, we got our people connected to this “regenerative” mindset, and brought them all to an event called “Hack to the Future.” So, basically we brought together all the working groups that have been running projects, and talked to this entire group about where we all are and the work we've done and then we went through the process of co-creating, which involves their feedback and recommendations: What do they think can be different? What do they think might have been the blind spots in what we have presented? So, there's a constant reinforcing of the mindset that we don't have to do things in isolation, that we can constantly be creating and moving forward together so that nobody is feeling isolated and alone in it. I think that's something that really, really energises a lot of people and, therefore, the appetite for experimentation and dealing with mistakes also increases to a great extent.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Quest chooses to describe its overall culture as one that alchemises the cultures of an “innovation hub, a social franchise, a leadership springboard, and a thought leader for policy change” (Quest Alliance, 2019). But over and above these, what catches attention with Quest's approach is that its structures and spaces for innovation stem from a deeper engagement with the term itself and what it really means. It perhaps goes to the heart of what characterises leadership at Quest. Aakash tries to capture the undercurrent:

I think with regards to innovation and creativity—creativity is really about the environment that is there as a whole. The learning has been that you can't just create an innovation fund or an innovation team to be able to say

that you want to foster innovation. It is a larger psychological safety that individuals experience on an everyday basis that allows people to think a little more differently, creatively.

That's a deeper kind of process. It's not only about, say, building these innovation teams, which are kind of the “in” thing at a lot of typical Silicon Valley start-ups. So, coming back to, therefore, the leadership process. One has to be able to do, I think, regular, theme-based [exploration]. You pick a theme every year, and go deeper into that theme. For example, “change.” What does it mean to change? So, the leadership team for the whole year thinks about the theme of change, and explores the concept with an external consultant, who works through the year with us, does change projects, experiences, [encourages us to] change ourselves, and reflect on our own personal journeys as individuals, and how we have experienced change, so that we can then better articulate what change means to me, what change means to my team, and what change means to the organisation.

As we grew, in the last seven or eight years, we've had seven different themes (e.g. Integrate, Emerge, Thrive, Heal, etc.) which came from the previous year's experience of what that year was like and feedback that we were hearing from the different teams, to be able to then get a pulse on where the organisation is at. Through qualitative interactions within the different teams that operate in a fairly decentralised manner, and through spaces created where we could hear these themes, we come up with the theme of the year. Last year (2020), it was about “Healing”: how do we heal collectively? We had gone through a loss, personal loss, as an organisation—our COO passed away. We also had a lot of shifts from a COVID perspective. So, we aligned on the idea of healing collectively. And then, the whole year was focusing on putting in practices and putting in strategies that allow us to heal as individuals, as teams, as an organisation. So then, the annual staff meeting or the annual retreat has a way for various different teams to experience healing.

Collectively for example: we got a Sonorium² and a sound artist to come and experiment with staff around healing through sound. Or healing through nature, where we got someone who is a permaculture designer, who could design your gardens: a designer of agricultural systems who could tell us how nature heals itself. So, at one level, we get the whole team to go through this healing process. And then we also get inputs from various teams on what it is that we can do in the coming year that can help us deepen and heal together. That's what then prompted us to, for example, have a full-time emotional counsellor, or emotional support person. And this happened before COVID actually, that we got an emotional counsellor on board. Luckily, as COVID set in, that system was in place. Or even if it is around, say, health benefits or wellbeing. What are the kinds of health benefits that we should have in place? If healing is a priority, does it mean for example, we need to look at the kind of leave structures we have to, say,

² A space containing a particular configuration of sound sources of various types and materials intended to create an immersive, sound-based, sensory atmosphere for people.

have a different category of leave. I forget the example of the leaves we introduced, but I think it was bereavement leave, given Corona, and a lot of peoples' family and friends being affected.

The word innovation is much in vogue. But Quest does not have the luxury of treating it as one more buzzword. For Quest, it is one of the most important ways to manifest self-learning: an organisational culture that encourages, facilitates and enables individual self-learning must eventually also translate to one that can support innovation and creativity.

Staying steady

There are many voices within civil society, business and governments which speak to the youth of today. With nearly two decades of persistent emphasis on skilling, technology and employment through the lens of self-learning, Quest's is not an insignificant one. It has managed to build a networked structure of civil society partners, state governments and education and skilling institutions in India. Its relationships with several prominent, innovation-focussed donors have allowed it the resources to invest deeply in organisational practices, structures and processes that can potentially nurture a culture of continuous learning, collaboration and technical innovation.

For team members like Nikita and Sylvia, who have been part of its journey for a long time, its people-centric culture remains a powerful reason to continue to stay. Nikita uses her own experience to summarise this:

What really has kept me at Quest I think is just the people. I feel like I've always had that backing of people where I know that I can just speak my mind out, I can speak my heart out, I'm not scared of venturing into unknown spaces, or trying out something new, because I do know that I have people who I can fall back on, who can provide that cushion and just be there.

Sylvia adds:

I have been at Quest six years and have not looked at other opportunities at all, mainly because of the people culture. Everyone is so approachable and we have a lot of fun in our work...the other thing is that once you join Quest, your perspective on your own life changes, because this organisation invests a lot of time in helping people discover themselves and grow.

The journey of Quest is very much the journey of the individual "quests" of the people who make it up. As the team looks ahead, the vista grows but along with it there are questions that will surface and continue to remind them and the rest of the leadership of the complexity of the mission Quest is on.

As Quest grows and pursues its programmatic scaling objectives, what might be some of the possibilities and challenges of the way of "being," "doing" and "relating" that it has nurtured through its early phases? Its rapid growth in available funds and team strength are a recent phenomenon relative to its age. How will its in-depth organisational practices continue to be implemented against this new scale without sacrificing depth or authenticity? How can an organisation undergoing a growth phase of this

nature hold together its foundations of cultural and talent practices? What factors could determine the applicability of Quest's model to other organisations in the Indian civil society landscape?

These questions are not unique to Quest. In a world of high expectations, they confront many civil society set-ups. But for those organisations that rest themselves upon a singular idea or an ideal, these questions demand constant watchfulness. What Quest's journey makes clear is that it is one thing to have resources, and quite another to make the choice to go through the difficult process of investing these in an intentional way: following through on deeply held beliefs in the value of a rich culture of relating, learning and belonging. Its investment in nurturing spaces where employees are able to understand themselves as people and embark on long-term personal journeys of growth and learning is one of enduring value, for this investment will continue to bear fruit for its people far beyond their time in Quest Alliance.

Exhibits

Exhibit 1: India's skilling challenge

Since independence, the Ministry of Labour and Employment has handled the responsibility for activities related to skill development, such as industrial training and apprenticeships. In 2014, these areas of responsibility were transferred to the new Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) founded to drive the central government's Skill India Initiative and to facilitate the creation of an ecosystem able to provide India's burgeoning young workforce with employable skills.

The National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship laid out by MSDE in 2015 indicates that the nation faces two critical skilling challenges: the paucity of a highly trained workforce. MSDE noted that only 4.7% of India's workforce is formally skilled (compared to 52% in the USA, 68% in the UK, 75% in Germany, 80% in Japan and 96% in South Korea); as well as the non-employability of large sections of the conventionally educated youth, who possess "little to no job skills" (MSDE, 2015). Of the 15 million youngsters entering the workforce each year, it is estimated that 65–75% are unemployable or are not ready for employment (Chakrabarty, 2019) and that of the 50 to 70 million jobs estimated to be created in the next five years, between 75 and 90% of these will require some degree of vocational training (Qazi, 2018). The policy further states that addressing this challenge will require the advancement of skills that are relevant to India's emerging economy, a significant expansion in the number of skilling facilities, and a rise in the quality of skilling programmes and facilities.

Exhibit 2: 21st century skills

Figure 1 below outlines 21st century skills identified by Quest, relevant across the learning ecosystems of middle schools, secondary schools, and industrial and vocational training institutes.

Fig. 1: 21st century skills identified by Quest Alliance



Source: Quest Alliance, 2019

Exhibit 3: Quest's programmes

Quest's portfolio of programmes is manifested across different types of "learning ecosystems": middle schools, secondary schools, technical and vocational training institutions, and educators.

Quest's programme in middle schools, known as Anandshala, operates in Bihar and Jharkhand. In 2021-22, the Anandshala programme worked with a total of 1,47,914 students, 1,905 educators and 529 school leaders (headmasters). The aim of the programme was to develop government schools into "inclusive and joyful learning spaces that motivate students to stay in school" and promote 21st century skills among learners. The programme also reaches out to out-of-school adolescents through local youth clubs. (Quest Alliance, 2022)

The secondary schools programme was implemented across seven states and worked to inculcate a STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] mindset among young adolescents, using technology as a tool for problem-solving, challenging gender stereotypes and encouraging more girls to pursue STEM pathways. The programme worked in partnership with nine state education departments and 11 implementation partners. At the end of 2022, the programme had reached 2,16,536 students across 1,073 schools. (Quest Alliance, 2022)

The MyQuest programme, with a partner network consisting of 875 skilling institutions (such as Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and Vocational Training Institutes (VTIs)), over 50 NGOs and eight state governments, aims to work with young adults transitioning to employment, to help them build key 21st century skills, successfully initiate career journeys and become “future-ready.” Despite the effect of the pandemic, 19% of youth in its network of ITIs and 69% of those in VTIs were able to enter employment; 6,200 entered self-employment. (Quest Alliance, 2022)

The programme focusing on educators is called MasterCoach, and is a professional development and certification programme for educators, equipping them with facilitation skills. The programme specifically ensured that educators developed stronger pedagogical skills suited for 21st century classroom engagement, developed classroom management skills to improve student-level outcomes, built a professional peer network, and developed the skills and attitude necessary to design self-learning pathways within learning institutions. By the end of 2022, it was operating in 20 states and one union territory. Eight state governments had adopted the MasterCoach model for use in their own capacity building initiatives. The programme worked with 341 partner organisations and produced 2,086 certified MasterCoaches. (Quest Alliance, 2022)

Further to these core programmes, Quest Alliance developed the Quest App, which was a learning platform for both students and trainers. Quest is also designing a Personalised Learning Engine to provide learners with an opportunity to define their needs and aspirations and undergo personalised learning journeys on the Quest App, as well as to connect learners to career opportunities and employer databases. The App contains about 250 hours of learning content across various areas. (Quest Alliance, 2022)

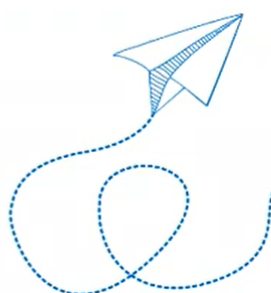

Quest2Learn was the organisation’s attempt at building a connected network of stakeholders for the education and skilling space: building a formal, sector-wide platform for the concept of self-learning. Its centrepiece was the annual Quest2Learn summit. At its last edition in 2021, it brought together 230 civil society organisations, 486 educational institutions, 17 government partners, 19 funders and a total of 1,125 delegates. Delegates included entrepreneurs, practitioners, educators, designers, investors and technology specialists. (Quest Alliance, 2022)

Exhibit 4: The Quest Way framework

Fig. 2: The Quest Way framework



What the Quest Way is about

- **The vision** of an organisation keeps the goal alive and does the job of reminding us why we are doing what we are doing
- **The values** we live by become our culture and the way the world comes to know us as a team. We keep these in mind in whatever we do

What is The Quest Way?

Way of Being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What guides us as an organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Our Vision ○ Our Mission ○ Our Goals
Way of Doing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How we approach and follow the implementation process to achieve the Vision, Goal and Mission
Way of Relating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How we practice this

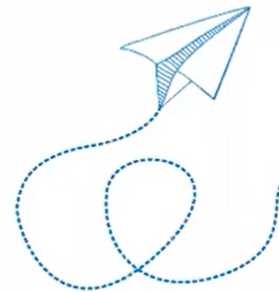
Vision

A world where young people thrive as **self-learners** to drive social and economic growth.



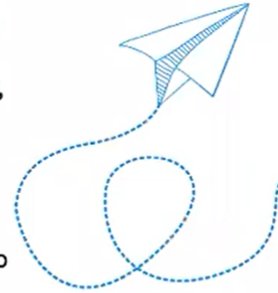
Mission

We transform **learning ecosystems** through **education technology, capacity building,** and **collaboration** to build 21st century skills for learners and facilitators.



Approach

- **EMPOWER** learners and educators to become innovators and change leaders, driving 21st century skills in their local environments.
- **EXPAND** partnerships with government, civil society and business to scale models of self-learning for 21st century skills, and facilitate 'anytime-anywhere learning', to catalyze learning environments.
- **ESTABLISH** advocacy alliances of thought leaders for mainstreaming self-learning for 21st century skills.
- **EXCEL** in building robust systems, culture and leadership to scale impact.



Values



CONTINUOUS LEARNING

- We stay curious
- We invite feedback
- We learn from both our successes and failures.



BEING COMPASSIONATE

- We celebrate diversity
- We care for others and ourselves



FOSTERING COLLABORATION

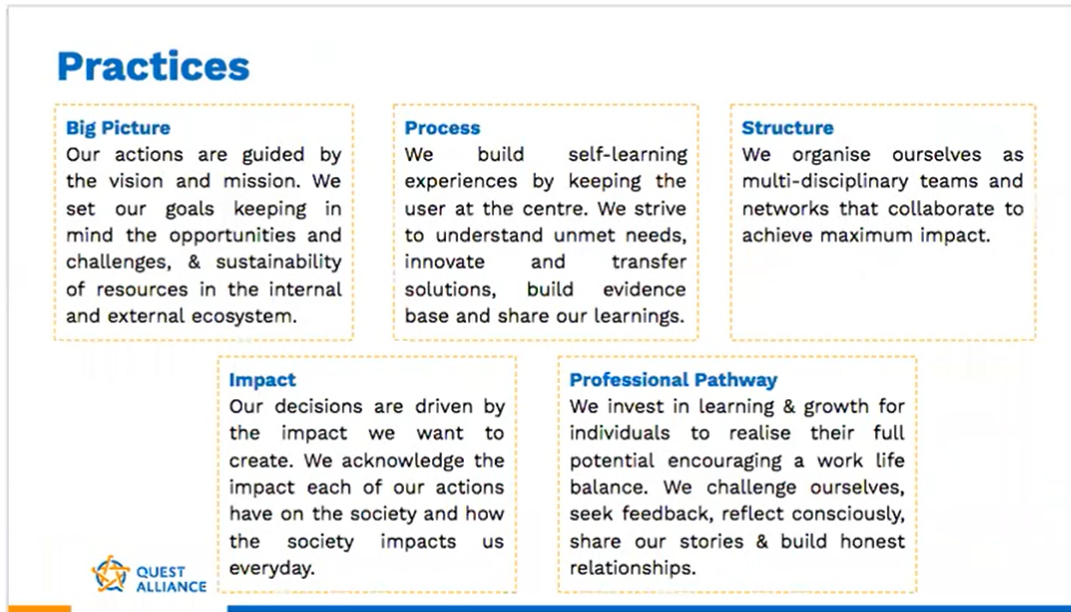
- We build relationships through trust
- We believe in co-creating vision, ideas and solutions.



LIVING WITH COURAGE

- We ask critical questions
- We take risks while staying honest and overcoming our fears





Source: Quest Alliance Internal, 2022

Reach for the Stars North Star statement

The Reach for the Stars programme has a defined “North Star” statement, shown in Fig. 3, which is intended to bring together and capture the spirit of the programme. It was put together as part of a co-creative process with inputs received from several of Quest’s shared spaces and working groups.

Fig. 3: Reach for the Stars: North Star statement

Co-create space & opportunities for individuals to take ownership and responsibility for the performance, learning & growth of Self and Organisation

Source: Quest Alliance Internal, 2022

Exhibit 5: Cultures and subcultures in a growing organisation

When it came to culture-building across locations, providing space and respect to allow local subcultures to develop whilst still ensuring that regional offices held true to Quest Alliance’s founding cultural philosophies and sentiments—and remained driven by a common set of values—was a challenge with several interesting dimensions. In some instances, it was more straightforward to address, such as regional cultures of using the term “sir” in conversations with fellow employees—strongly discouraged by Quest Alliance—or, as Neha Parti elaborates, some issues involved deeper nuances and were more difficult to address:

Each of the regions also has its own reality. The culture of our team, say in Gujarat, will be very different from the culture of a team in Bihar to the

culture of the team in Bangalore. So, being mindful of how cultural reality has influenced people's behaviour and how we help them kind of overcome some of that conditioning that they are also raised with, is important.

For example, in a place like Bihar—and this is something that we've seen over the years, and we've worked with it very, very consciously when our work was really expanding in Bihar at one point in time—all the programme officers whose job it was to be out there in the field were men because the notion there was that it's harder for women to travel. Public transport may not be safe, there are long distances to be covered, things like that. It was just easier to hire men. Now, we have women programme officers as well who are equally capable of taking public transport, travelling, and all of that. It's taken us a while to get there.

And then also things like, if it's a woman and you say that, “Okay, if you're running late, you can use the office transport that is available.” Men can tend to look at it as, “Oh, just because she's a woman, she's getting that privilege, but nobody offers that to me.” So, I think, we've also had to work with teams on how to overcome these gender notions as well—that safety is everybody's right, irrespective of whether you're a man or woman or transgender—so, how are certain policies put in place which are also gender-agnostic? If a man has also gotten late because of work, they are also equally eligible for whatever provisions the office has to make.

Then, in places like Bihar, Gujarat, women are not comfortable talking about the fact that they are on their periods, and therefore they can't travel on the field, or may suddenly have to take time off. Because it's up to [the manager on the field], if someone suddenly goes on sick leave, [the manager] could be like, “Oh, but you were fine till yesterday, what has happened to you all of a sudden?” So, I think also just bringing that into people's consciousness, that there might be certain kinds of issues which women face. And if you are a male supervisor, you really need to create those safe spaces for them to be able to come and discuss that with you. In Bihar, I think it's harder for men and very hard to have a conversation about periods with a woman. I don't want to generalise, there might be people in Bihar who are also okay doing that. But I think it takes a longer time to create that kind of an environment, say, versus in a place like Bangalore, where people might still be used to it, might be a little bit more exposed to these kinds of conversations every day in their social circles as well. So, those are some of the kinds of differences that we see.

Then I think, some of the things also have to do with the fact that a lot of our facilitators and fellows are really young freshers and many of them, again, are women. For many of them, it's also their first working experience. So there's almost this very “grateful” or “obedient” kind of attitude that they come with: “I'm so glad that you chose me, I'm so happy to be here.” That kind of thing. So, that also becomes important to break—you're here because you deserved it, you're here because you went through a proper selection process, and you were selected from many other applications that were received. At the same time, making their supervisors aware that look, these are the patterns that are there in your team right now. It's great that

they are happy to be here, but then, how are you also enhancing their own confidence in themselves to be able to put their point of view forward, to be able to ask questions, to be able to share whatever it is that they're going through? I think those are the kinds of variations one can notice as one moves between different geographies as well.

Exhibit 6: Quest Alliance financial and organisational data

The figures and tables in Exhibit 6 provide an overview of Quest Alliance’s funding and expenditure scenario in the form of snapshots and trends over the years.

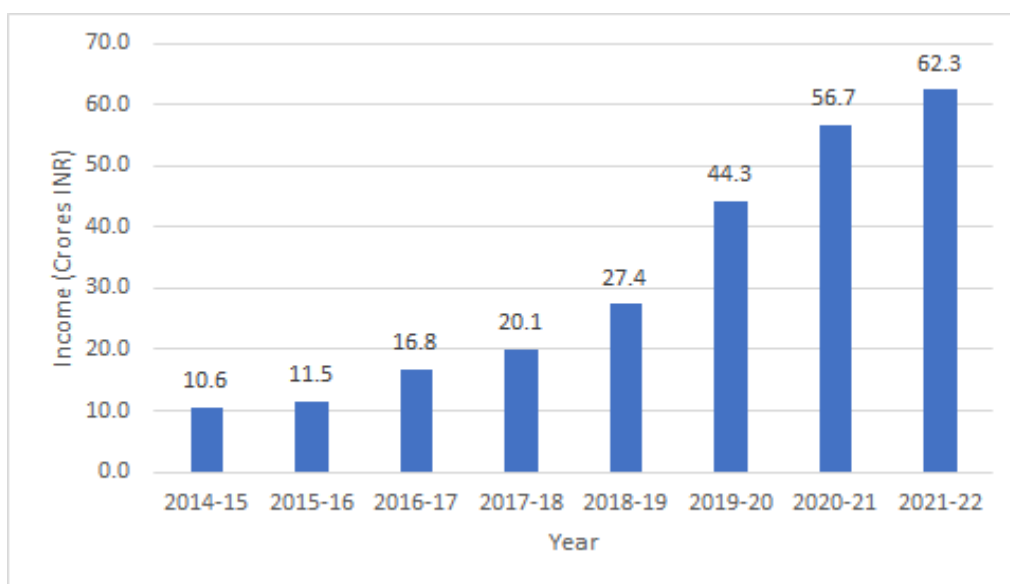
Table 1: Quest Alliance donors, 2022

Donors	Amount (Rs.)	% of total donor income
IBM	20,68,07,682	52.4
Accenture India	8,39,27,578	21.27
Porticus Asia Limited	2,25,40,987	5.71
Fossil Foundation	1,11,21,000	2.82
JP Morgan India	1,08,06,000	2.74
Sanjeev Prasad	76,09,812	1.93
Softlayer Technologies India Private Limited	53,03,356	1.34
UNICEF	52,20,806	1.32
Charity Aid Foundation (America)	51,96,082	1.32
Dalyan Foundation	41,74,903	1.06
Kantar (IMRB)	39,00,000	0.99
Impact Foundation India	34,83,314	0.88
Dasra (USA)	24,09,990	0.61
Nisum Technologies India	22,02,150	0.56
Child Aid Network	21,09,160	0.53

Wells Fargo International Solutions Private Limited	20,00,000	0.51
Cappgemini Technology Service India Ltd	14,82,075	0.38
Sanovi Technologies Pvt Ltd	13,81,829	0.35
Give India Foundation	11,06,034	0.28
Truven Health Analytics Ind	6,16,659	0.16
HT Parekh Foundation	2,70,800	0.07
Scratch Foundation	1,83,892	0.05
Individual Donations	1,28,948	0.03
Bank Interest	91,57,456	2.32
Other Income	15,15,000	0.38
TOTAL	39,46,55,513	100

Source: Quest Alliance Annual Report, 2022

Fig. 4: Quest Alliance income trends 2015-2022



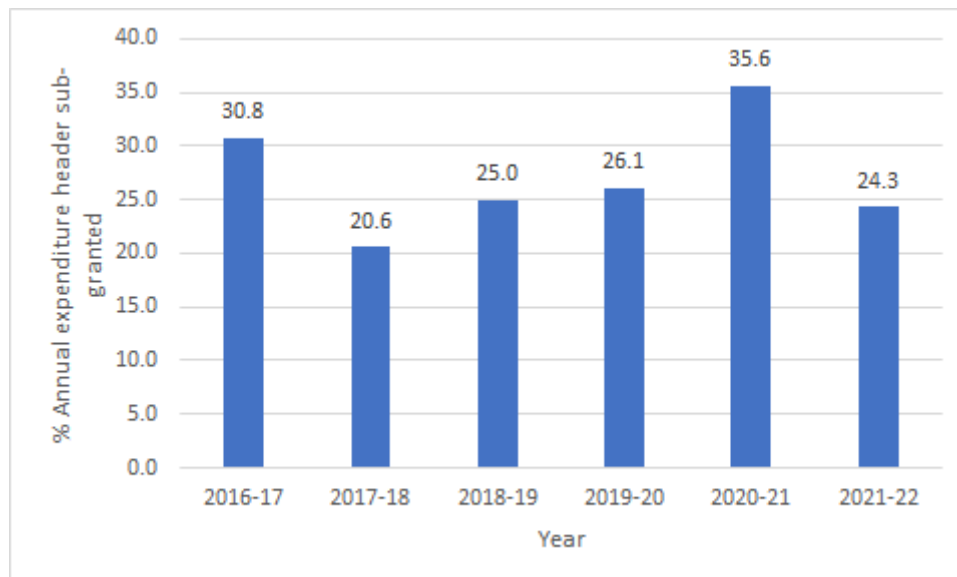
Source: Quest Alliance Annual Reports 2015–2022

Table 2: Quest Alliance breakdown of expenses 2021-22

Expenditure	Amount (Rs)
Overhead and Administration Cost	6,26,419
Program Expenditure	11,71,016
Project Expenditure (Foreign Grant)	11,70,88,469
Project Expenditure (Local Grant)	48,92,13,457
Depreciation	62,83,961
Excess of Income over Expenditure	88,46,303
TOTAL	62,32,29,624

Source: Quest Alliance Annual Report, 2022

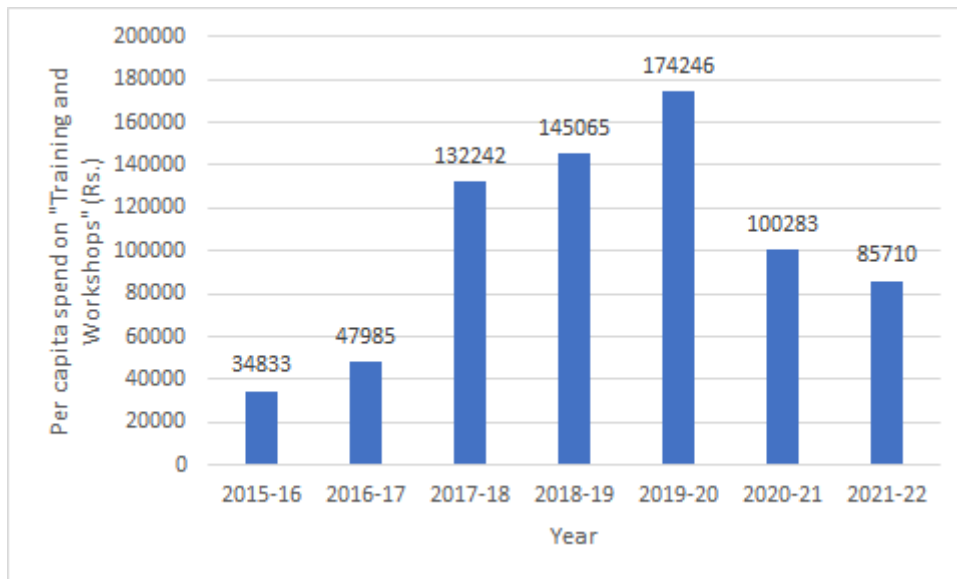
Fig. 5: Quest Alliance trends in funds sub-granted to other organisations



Source: Quest Alliance Annual Reports 2017–2022.

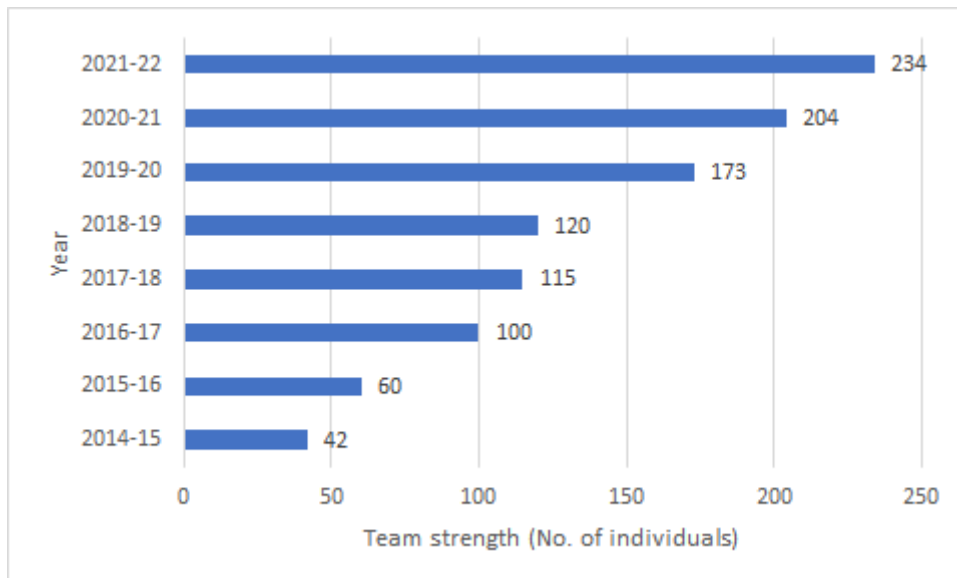
Note: Prior to 2016–17, no funds were reported as sub-granted.

Fig. 6: Trends in expenditure under header “Training and Workshops,” 2016–2022



Source: Quest Alliance Annual Reports 2016–2022

Fig. 7: Full-time team strength at Quest Alliance, 2015-2022



Source: Quest Alliance annual reports, 2015–2022

Table 3: Salary distribution of Quest Alliance full-time team as of 31 March 2022

Monthly Salary Range	Female	Male	Gender Non-Binary	Grand Total
Up to 50,000	87	50	1	138
50,001–100,000	28	41		69
100,001–150,000	6	8		14
150,001 and Above	6	7		13
Grand Total	127	106	1	234

Source: Quest Alliance Annual Report, 2022

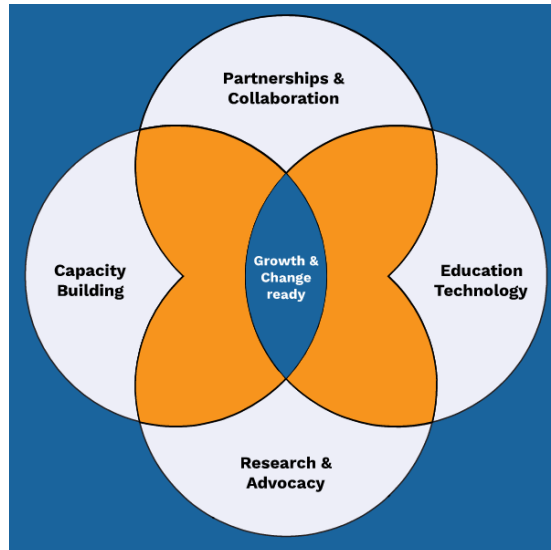
Exhibit 7: Quest’s strategy for scale

This exhibit goes into more detail on Quest’s strategic plan for 2019–2023. It introduces learners to some of the principles upon which the scaling strategy has been developed, the frameworks and models guiding the “scaling up” and “scaling out” of different programmes and guiding the internal organisational changes that will be required to sustain the scaling project.

Quest’s strategic plan for achieving these goals seeks to bring together the major spheres of its work: “Partnerships and Collaboration,” “Capacity Building,” “Education Technology” and “Research and Advocacy” to generate a “force multiplication” where the whole is operating with coherence and generating impact greater than the sum of its parts.

The intersection of the spheres of work creates the orange “butterfly” in the centre of Fig. 8. The orange space represents Quest’s internal organisational architecture. The core of the approach (the blue space in the middle) is to develop its culture, systems, structures and processes in such a way that the organisation is internally capable of sustaining a process of growth and change between 2019 and 2023.

Fig. 8: Quest’s organisational architecture towards its 5-year strategic plan



Source: Quest Alliance Annual Report, 2021

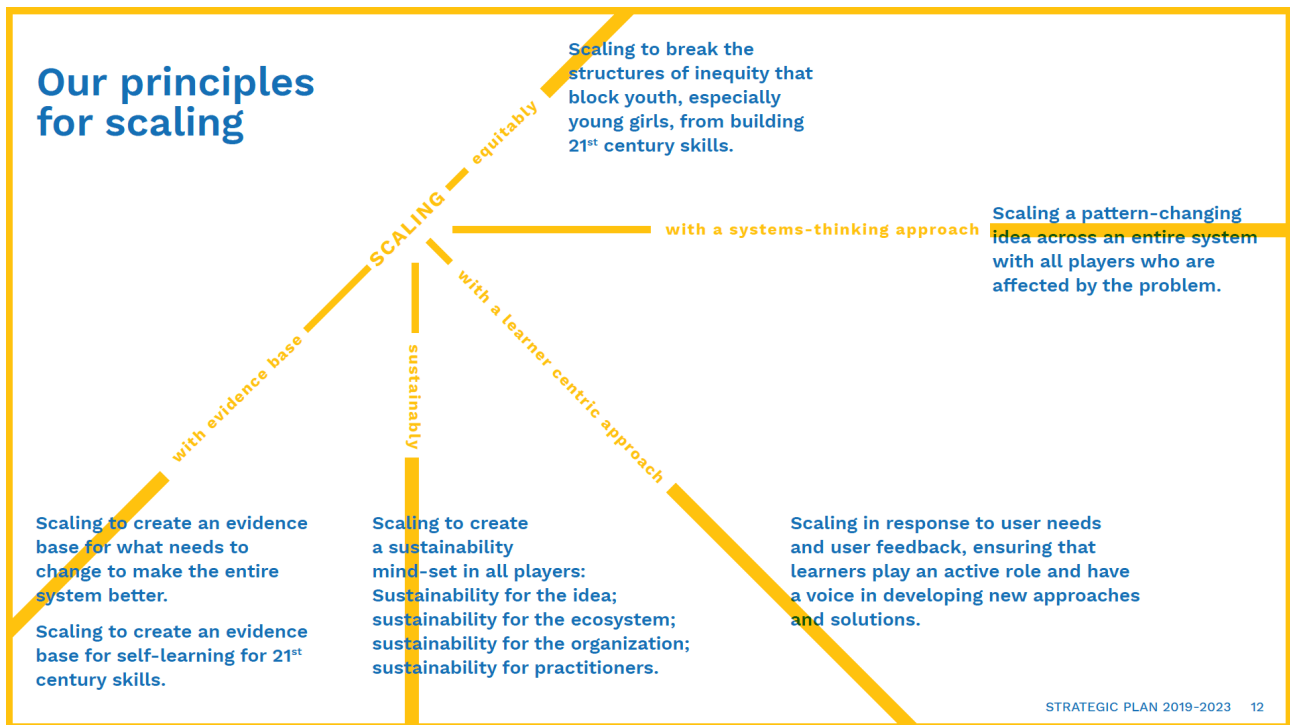
Figure 9 below shows a more detailed view of Fig. 8. Figure 9 expands upon the “butterfly” at the intersection of Quest’s four main programme verticals, detailing how the organisation’s core vision and values get manifested through a particular organisational architecture. Quest’s model for impact at scale thus ties together the organisation’s vision, values, internal organisational architecture and its external programmatic activities for an overall force multiplication.

Fig. 9: Quest's planned organisational architecture model in detail



Source: Quest Alliance, 2019

Fig. 10: Quest Alliance principles for scaling in its strategic plan for 2019-23



Source: Quest Alliance, 2019

Scaling up and scaling out

Quest’s programmes follow distinct approaches to scale, depending on the type of programme and its design. The first is a “scale up” model. Of its programmes, Anandshala and MyQuest follow the “scale up” approach—whereby the approach to scale is to prototype, test and scale replicable models for transforming the corresponding learning ecosystems (Anandshala—middle and secondary schools; MyQuest—Technical and Vocational Training Institutes).

The second approach is the “scale out” approach, which applies to educator development programmes, Quest App and Quest2Learn. Scaling out is focused on transferring and sharing the talent developed (e.g. MasterCoaches and trainers) or knowledge generated (on QuestApp or Quest2Learn) to the wider ecosystem through research and advocacy, capacity building and education technology.

Quest’s strategic approach to scaling up and scaling out its programmes are based on the 4E Approach shown in Fig. 11 (also refer to Exhibit 4). For each of its programmes, the 4E Approach is applied alongside a scaling up or scaling out strategy to determine the goals and objectives the programme will meet by the end of 2023:

- *Empower* learners and educators with 21st century skills.
- *Expand* partnerships with the ecosystem of CSOs, government and businesses to scale self-learning models promoting 21st century skills and innovations in “anytime-anywhere learning.”
- *Establish* networks and alliances of thought leaders for bringing self learning of 21st century skills into the mainstream.

- The *Excel* element refers to the Quest’s internal ability, as an organisation, to meet its scaling objectives. For instance, through robust talent management, culture building, and project management and fundraising processes.

Fig. 11: The 4E Approach



Source: Quest Alliance, 2019

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