To empower the Maharashtra Academic Authority to evolve into an exemplary, apex government body with leadership in teacher support, research and continuous professional development to all education functionaries, leading to a creation of a conducive education ecosystem for teachers and students in Maharashtra
Section 1: MSCERT Restructuring Project
Introduction

The SCERT in Maharashtra was set up with the mandate of developing a state curriculum framework, designing and implementing teacher training programmes, creating a state perspective plan, developing a holistic vision on teacher education, and conducting action research, leading to enhancement in quality of education. However over the years multiple reports have commented on the problems with teacher education programmes and the lack of effectiveness of ongoing initiatives by DIETs and the SCERT. There is also a lack of a shared vision, goals and strategy towards these responsibilities. Further, assessments like the NAS, SLAS and ASER reveal the poor progress made with respect to student learning outcomes as well.

To tackle all of this, the Government of Maharashtra launched a major reform programme named ‘Pragat Shaikshanik Maharashtra’ (PSM) - Educationally Progressive Maharashtra to revamp all aspects of primary and secondary education in the state. Its key aspects are census assessment of all children in the state conducted thrice a year and 25 criteria developed, based on which schools can declare themselves Pragat. This initiative gained traction with the media as well as teachers and the community at large.

As a next phase of the reform, it was decided to undertake a strengthening of all the supporting government bodies in the Department of Education, beginning with the SCERT. In line with the provisions in RTE Act (2009) SCERT came to be designated as the state academic authority in 2012. On this basis, a concerted effort was initiated to strengthen the SCERT in terms of human resources, processes and a complete overhaul in the way trainings and research are designed and implemented.

In order to help the evolve this idea and implement its plans a team incubated in Thermax Foundation and funded by Central Square foundation was placed in SCERT to help lead the process of restructuring and capacity building to help rejuvenate and transform the MSCERT into an aspirational and ambitious nodal institution with a strong vision and measurable outcomes towards curriculum improvement, teacher development & student achievement in Maharashtra.

In the sections that follow we elaborate on the specifics of each phase of the intervention, the growth of the project team, key project milestones, and the plan for the oncoming years. In the process we also reflect on some of the challenges faced, and anticipated as well as our strategies to overcome them.
Restructuring the MSCERT

Where we started and how the idea evolved

Why and Why Now

A basic question to be answered before an elaboration of the project is to do with the rationale of the project and if at all the present environment is right for it. As mentioned earlier, the rationale derives from the recommendations of multiple national policy recommendations. For instance, the position paper on teacher education by the NCERT (2005) recommends the strengthening of existing teacher support systems if the new way of education and learning as conceptualised by the NCF is to be implemented effectively. UNICEF Report (October 2015) brings up the issue of obsolescence of existing middle management, existing Teacher Education mechanisms in Maharashtra with strong recommendations to set up resource pools at each administrative level - State, District, Block and Cluster. In a similar vein, the Joint Review Mission Report (2014) contains recommendations to revitalise teacher support due to the ineffectiveness of present initiatives and ossified teaching learning processes observed in the state.

Therefore it is easy to see the relevance of an initiative aimed at strengthening the existing government support systems for teachers as a vital step to create a conducive environment in which teachers and students can flourish.

As to the suitability of the political and bureaucratic climate, it must be mentioned that the primary push has come from the government in taking cognizance of the need, conceptualising and initiating it under a successful reform banner of PSM. The OSD to the education minister, Ms Prachi Sathe and the Principal Secretary, Education Mr. Nandkumar were both personally invested in the initiative and backed the presence of the project team to be placed in the SCERT, beginning November, 2015. These were the most important enabling factors for the initiation and eventual positive growth of the project.
Evolution of the Idea

In the large scheme of things, the period from November 2015 till April 2017 marks Year 0 - the year that lays the foundation for the establishment of the team within MSCERT and the subsequent achievement of targets in the following years. That said, this year has itself seen an evolution in the way the priorities for the project and the team itself have evolved.

Initial Phase

The initial title of the project was Maharashtra Teacher Education Reform Project. Its initial priorities were to design and initiate structures and processes for transitioning state education machinery towards achieving the goals set forth by RtE 2009 and Pragat Shaikshanik Maharashtra (PSM) Program. The project was formally initiated from November 2, 2015 with Abhinav Unni and Shruti Joshi officially coming on board.

By February, Abhinav had begun focusing work on the Online Teacher Portal, marking the bifurcation of MTERP into MAA Restructuring and the OPTE.

The main objectives for both during this phase was to get a foundational understanding of the office, the stakeholders and the scope of involvement.

Transition Phase

The period from April to September marked a transition in the team members - with Shruti and Kanchan leaving and Siddesh coming on board. Having achieved, to an extent, a basic understanding of the field of work - the state department of education in general and SCERT specifically, the team focused on designing and implementing selection procedures to fill vacant positions within SCERT and DIETs. However a bulk of time was still spent in building relationships and working to release a Government Resolution to make the restructuring process official.

Consolidation Phase

The key inflection point for the project team was the release of the MSCERT Restructuring Government resolution, dated 17th October, 2017. The GR itself contained many of the team's recommendations. This initiated markedly increased levels of involvement of the team within MSCERT in terms of helping officials in understanding and implementation of the GR. This period also marked the team's involvement in many aligned engagements in an advisory capacity - drafting of international cell concept note, equity concept note, creation of rubric for selection of multilingual reading material, designing selection process for
textbook writer’s panel (Board of Studies) for Maths and Marathi among others. Further, owing to the increased involvement and exposure to the government systems, the team was able to prioritise its objectives and strategy for the next 3 years of the intervention and expand to a 6 member team. This culminated in a review meeting with Mr. Vinod Tawde, Hon. Minister of Education, Government of Maharashtra as well as Mr. Nand Kumar, Principal Secretary, Education, where the team presented its three year strategy and priorities for its engagement with MSCERT. The suggestions were duly approved by the minister, thus firmly establishing the future direction of the project.
The Past Year
What everyone’s been up to and how we’ve fared

Highlights

Following are excerpts from in-depth interviews conducted by an external representative with MAA stakeholders conducted in February, 2017. These are presented just as a glimpse into the approach with which we have engaged with them and the way we are perceived by the members of MAA.

"TF team is always ready to listen and understand our professional needs and to work with us instead of imposing their views or agenda on us. This for me is a really sustainable approach that can lead to a long term collaboration with them. We feel safer in sharing our thoughts, needs and working challenges. We know they understand us and they can support us."

Thermax Foundation Team (TF) was welcomed since the early stage of its supporting project here at MAA. It was very clear for everyone its work and role within MAA. TF build a trusting environment since the beginning. No threats were perceived in our everyday work, but rather the support provided was recognized as valuable and necessary.

"The vision setting and direction provided were outstanding. Not only that, but they were able to build cooperative processes, aiming at building a team spirit between different officers with different tasks. The flow of communication was clear, even if at the beginning a bit complicated to follow. They brought back to MAA the academic discussions that were for long time a bit forgotten in our everyday work. They are great at sharing with us good practices and bringing new perspectives in the everyday working life of the institution. If I have to mention two relevant aspects brought in by Thermax Team, it would be innovative vision and more effective work structure."

"The flow of work and building stronger bounds between departments are two main challenges. It is clear how TF is well recognized as a fundamental partner to make these two aspects more efficient in MAA. They can lead structure of bridging the possible gaps that exist between decision-making and the actual implementation of working strategies."
Timeline

APR 2016
- Siddesh Joins the Team
- Foundations of working relationships built within SCERT.
- Work on concept note for Equity begins

MAY 2016
- Advertisement for recruitment disseminated
- Team designs selection procedure. Approved by Govt.
- Online link developed to invite applications for new positions in SCERT & DIETs.

JUN 2016
- Over 2500 Applications received, sorted, shortlisted
- 2 Selection conferences conducted

JUL 2016
- 2 selection conferences conducted
- Final list of candidates prepared
- Team participates in Board Of Studies (textbook committee) training

AUG 2016
- Release of Restructuring GR
- Landscape study of posts to be increased/merged under SCERT
- SCERT renamed Maharashtra Academic Authority (MAA). DIET renamed to District Institute for Educational Continuous Professional Development
- Regional Academic Authorities (RAA) established in Mumbai, Nashik, Amravati, Aurangabad and Nagpur
- 12 new subject specific positions created across 33 DIECPDs

SEP 2016
- Concept note for International Schools Project Drafted
- First lot of orders (~120) for selected candidates released

OCT 2016
- First batch of selected teachers/officers join their new posts in MAA / RAA
- Fifth Selection Conference held in Pune to fill remaining vacancies in MAA/RAA
- Training and Demo for all DIECPD Principals conducted to enable them to conduct district wise selection
- Online link developed for district wise applications to fill vacancies in DIECPDs. Over 2000 applications received.

NOV 2016
- Selection Conferences conducted across all DIECPDs
- ASER report findings presented to state senior leadership. Brain storming and strategy meeting with principal secretary

DEC 2016
- Development of 2020 project plan
- Development of Concept note for LFE
- Supported MAA Departments in undertaking International case studies of high performing education systems based on OECD study

FEB 2017
- Presentation to Education Minister and Principal Secretary on 3 year project plan. Minister approves.
- 155 Orders for DIECPD dispatched on the basis of results of selection conference
- Evolution of relationship of team members into positions of significant influence within DoE and MAA
- Team designs Goal setting workshop plan for MAA/RAA

MAR 2017
- Team designs Goal setting workshop plan for MAA/RAA
Key Activities

Selection Conference and Rubric Design:

After suggesting that existing vacancies be filled and additional positions be created as necessary, the project team was entrusted with the responsibility of designing and implementing a transparent selection procedure to ensure that the most motivated and competent applicants are placed in these vacancies. The team's suggestion that we can ensure teacher voice is injected into policy making was approved.

Applications were invited through an online form and an advertisement in the newspapers from Officers and Teachers working within the system. More than 3000 applications were submitted through online and paper channels. After scrutinising the applications, shortlisted candidates were asked to participate in Selection conferences. To select the best resources across the state for MSCERT, Regional MSCERT and DIET experts, it was decided to hold selection conferences at Pune, Aurangabad and Nagpur.

The selection conferences were participative in nature with applicants being to graded, by existing MSCERT officials whom we trained, on their performance and participation in sessions spanning two days. Details of the selection conference criteria and rubrics, can be found in the appendix. After 5 rounds of selection conferences, from over 3000 applications received, 360 applicants have been selected and deputed to respective offices across all districts in Maharashtra (there's potential for a catchy graphic here).

This approach was appreciated by the senior leadership and we were subsequently also brought in to design the selection procedures for Board of Studies (the panel responsible for writing textbooks) for Maths and Marathi. The team worked with HODs to design and train a panel of observers to successfully implement the process for Marathi. The Maths procedure is anticipated to be conducted in the 2nd week of June.

Similarly the idea of rubrics have also been appreciated and the team was asked to design a rubric to help the government select and rank bilingual reading material to be provided to all schools in the state. The team worked with the Education Commissioner to design the process in a transparent, yet confidential manner, and it was implemented to the satisfaction of the senior leadership.
Evolution of Government Resolution:

The entire process of the restructuring being implemented hinged on the release of a Government Resolution to that effect. This would make all the processes that were underway with the selection conference legitimate and would provide much needed clarity to all the government functionaries about the change in the nature of work at MAA. The project team sat in with the senior leadership to take the draft of the GR through multiple iterations. At each step, decisions were taken about multiple key issues

i) Name: The MSCERT was renamed to Maharashtra Academic Authority. This emerged from the notification in the RTE (2009) that the state department of education needs to nominate 1 academic authority to ensure that its goals are met. Given that the DIETs role was seen to be evolving and heading in the direction of focusing on in service teacher support, they were renamed as District Institutes of Educational Continuous Professional Development. The names were suggested and approved by the senior leadership at the State Department of Education.

ii) Decentralisation: The decentralisation of the apex body into regional offices, which would ensure that the regions which have hitherto been neglected, could get the attention and support they deserve. It was finally decided based on mutual priorities that there would be 1 Head Office in Pune (Vidya Pradhikaran / Maharashtra Academic Authority) with 5 Regional Academic Authorities (Pradeshik Vidya Pradhikaran). In addition to carrying out programmes aligned to their subject expertise for the entire state, RAAs are also tasked with co-ordinating, in their region, the programmes initiated by other departments in MAA. With this stated, the subject divisions of MAA and RAA are as follows:

Pune: Co-Ordination, Research, Curriculum, Evaluation, Marathi, ancillary languages, IT, Pre-service Education, Equity Cell. Centre for all subject leads.

Nagpur: Science subject expertise - responsibility to provide inputs on curriculum, assessment and design and implementation of teacher support for science, rests with this office.

Aurangabad: English. Officers and teachers who are part of the British Council English training process have been selected and placed here to strengthen English Language teaching, training and evaluation. They are responsible to give inputs on curriculum and evaluation and design and implement teacher support programmes throughout the state for English.
Mumbai: Expertise in Counselling, Child Psychology. Responsible to revamp the curriculum for vocational guidance and conduct relevant programmes pertinent to their subjects

Nashik: This is an upgraded DIET. It has an equal distribution across all subjects. The DIET principal of Amravati will head this.

Amravati: This is also an upgraded DIET with similar distribution of subjects as Nashik. IT will be headed by the Principal of DIET Amravati.

**iii) Human Resources Development:** As per the status quo, all government offices have a department for ‘Establishment’ which takes care of appointments, transfers, salaries, collating service books and CR report and so on for employees. However it was felt that if the capacities of the current staff were to be built in a sustainable manner a dedicated resource had to be created within the system which will continue with the structures introduced by our team. This department will now be responsible for developing and implementing systems for performance appraisal, among other functions typically taken on by HR departments in contemporary organisations.

**iv) Equity Cell:** The scope of the existing Women’s Education cell has been expanded to form the Equity Cell - with a view to ensuring inclusiveness and equity in the educational system. The main focus areas would be to work on addressing issues related to caste, gender, religious equity, addressing needs of children with special needs, eliminating the spate of drop outs from schools, and ensure an equitable treatment to EVERY child. The GR elaborates the details and the scope of work of the Equity Cell.

**v) IT Cell:** (See Section 2: MITRA)
Study of Merging of Posts

For the successful implementation of the restructuring and getting adequate number of people with an academic background to MSCERT, it was necessary to increase some positions within MSCERT as well as DIETs - 660 to be exact. However the Principal Secretary was clear that all of this must be done at no extra cost to the exchequer. It was also pointed out that there were several sanctioned posts within the jurisdiction of the Department of Education that were either vacant for a number of years, or the institutions under which they were sanctioned, no longer needed those many posts. Therefore the team assisted the MSCERT officers in figuring out how many such posts existed and helped map them to the requirement as per the restructuring process. This then culminated into a proposal that is presently with the ministry for approval. Once this step is complete, it will mark a great milestone in institutionalising the restructuring process that has been initiated.

Concept Notes

In addition to the operational work like selection, the team has also been involved in an advisory capacity to the Department of Education. In the scope of this work, the team has helped with the drafting of concept notes for two major initiatives of the Department - the Equity Cell and the International Schools Project. This work was completed drawing from international policy research and the priorities of the senior leadership. They have since been officially issued as circulars and government resolutions by the Principal Secretary.

Relationship Building

Since year 0 marked the initial phase of the project, the main priority of the team has been to build strong and lasting relationships with the officers at MSCERT. This included working with the senior leadership like the OSD, Principal secretary, Commissioner, Director.. As well as the middle management - Class 1,2 and 3 officers, support staff and so on. The approach adopted was one of establishing a non threatening, and helping presence within the office. This helped the team being perceived as motivated individuals who could be called on for inputs and assistance for a wide number of tasks. We went ahead and helped out even if it wasn’t aligned to our initial project priorities of restructuring. In fact, being involved in a wide variety of assignments helped us gain a holistic understanding of the activities of the MSCERT, temperaments of the MSCERT staff and helped evolve priorities and feasibility for the subsequent years of the project.
Update Meeting with Hon. Minister of Education:

On April 3, 2017, the team was invited to present its learnings from the initial phase and put forth its proposed strategy for the coming 3 years. After a detailed discussion on each point, the plan was duly approved by the Minister and the Principal Secretary. A snapshot of plan is mentioned in the ‘Looking Ahead’ section below.

Key Learnings

Balancing Ownership over Urgency for Excellent Outcomes:

Over the course of our interaction with the Principal Secretary, and other stakeholders and experts in the field, we have come to realise that the process of reform that has ownership of the people involved is more likely to succeed than one with a world class concept note and framework, which points to a goal that appears aspirational, but to which a large number of stakeholders find it difficult to relate. Unless there is genuine buy-in (as opposed to doing merely because one is instructed) from every rung of stakeholder, there is little hope of the reform sustaining. This is because the top leadership rotates and political leadership is prone to change. It is the middle management / functionaries that are responsible to keep either an idea, structure or process going. Therefore outreach, making the goals relatable to a large number of stakeholders, and ownership are much more valuable than an immediate insistence on excellent outcomes. Once this buy in is achieved, slowly the rigour can be stepped up to leads towards the desired excellence. This has been the case with the PSM initiative. In the first cycle of assessment the benchmark for ‘Pragat’ was set at children scoring 40% marks. It was then raised to 50% and as of the most recent cycle stands at 60%. Because of the ownership of the teachers and middle order functionaries in understanding and implementing the processes, it is possible to keep increasing the benchmark without any major pushback. This has been a very important learning for the team about large scale systemic reform.
Managing Perceptions and working with stakeholders:

The most vital thing, that we realised while working within government systems, is that it is crucial to cultivate a mutual understanding that ‘we are on the same team’ - not ‘we have the same interests and aims’, but actually the understanding of being part of the same team - sharing in their travels, experiences, concerns and successes. This has helped us build credibility and trust in the most genuine way possible, that is to say, not in a way to further our own agenda but actually working with the officers to aid them with any pressing issue they may have, regardless of whether it is aligned to our immediate priorities. What this does is build a sense of camaraderie and reciprocity - if we have helped them, successfully and to their satisfaction, with 3-4 tasks of their choosing, maybe they will be more responsive to something that we may suggest and prioritise as the 5th or 6th task. The language we use, the way we work with scant regard for organisational identity helped us establish a mutual identity of working on the same team. This was evidenced by the fact that when there are meetings with other NGO partners we are considered by default as representatives of the MSCERT! Creating this sense of working together has been instrumental in establishing ourselves over a period of 1.5 years within MSCERT to be able to influence decisions at multiple levels.

Power & Potential of the Public System:

A fact that we were in awe of throughout our initial association with MSCERT and the Department of education - is the sheer scale of it - 700,000 teachers, 22 million children and a state budget of 420 billion rupees! (potentially can be represented in an illustration that appears like a vignette on the side) These are staggering numbers! No parallel or private system has either the capacity or the sustained will reach and serve the absolute niches that the public system reaches and neither can we afford to ignore those whose only access to education is through the public system. We realised that given the sheer human resources, and number of people it serves, the public system if channelised effectively is the most important actor in initiating and sustaining reform. This has reinforced our belief in the education as a public service and has motivated to catalyse change in the public systems so that they can function with the sensitivity and efficiency required to serve ALL children.

In terms of human resources an important reflection for us has been that when we say ‘public system’ or ‘state’ it is not meant to construct a monolithic identity of people or the state. At multiple levels there is a difference in the zeal, capabilities and temperaments of the people involved. We have come across teachers, politicians, bureaucrats with astounding clarity and zeal to transform the system - actors who are usually written off in mainstream discourse on public education. Another important learning is the porous nature
of the state in choosing to work with multiple partners at various levels - ranging from corporate consultants, to NGOs and foundations. For instance in Maharashtra, we find that the Department of Education has over 50 MOUs for interventions in different regions across the state.

All these factors make the public system a potent field of initiating and sustaining collective action towards the addressing problem of educational equity in the state of Maharashtra, and potentially the rest of the country as well.

Need for Systems Leaders

From our experience of the past year working and interactions with diverse individuals and organisations across sectors, it came across that another immediate problem in Education space seems to be that many organisations are drawn to ‘solve’ the complex problem of inequities in education readily and urgently. Given the perceived urgency in solving the problem, many existing and new entrants in the sector underestimate the complexity of problem. This might take the form of not giving the requisite space that some actors or programs might need to flourish, gaps in understanding capabilities of various actors in the ecosystem and allowing for adequate amount of time to show meaningful results, given the inherent complexity in the system. It is essential to approach solutions towards these problems by first taking into account and patiently understanding the systemic complexity with a focus on long term, sustainable impact. Due to the sheer number and scale at which various governmental and non-governmental actors operate within the education ecosystem and allied sectors, a larger challenge that is anticipated is a lack of collaboration and shared meaning among these diverse actors. The lack of spaces & platforms to develop a common agenda and a shared meaning for impactful work in education, will prove detrimental to the potentially great work that could happen in the next decade.

Given these concerns, it is important to build and develop a pipeline of systems leaders within the education ecosystem, allied to the values of leadership listed above, whose focus will be to create these spaces and platforms to aggregate diverse actors and work with the enmeshed networks of human relationships across sectors.
Looking Ahead

As mentioned in the introduction, the end of year 0 has seen the project move from initiation to consolidation, in terms of the position of trust and influence within the scert. Given this, the timing is deemed to be right for actively introducing structures and processes aligned to a clear progression plan. Going by that, with the help of CSF and JPAL, the team has worked on and a 3 year progression plan as well as a theory of change, with aligned metrics.

Largely, we aim for our engagement and inputs within MAA to be aligned to the following 5 axes:

i) **Vision and Goal Setting**: Working with MAA as a whole to set an overall vision aligned to KRAs assigned by the Hon. Chief Minister. Helping each department set SMART goals, follow up on them, track progress and create action plans throughout the year.

ii) **Employee Performance**: Primarily working on strengthening the newly created HR department and creating holistic structures for assigning and tracking KRAs for employees, empowering HODs to provide feedback and mentor their teams, influence policies to link these processes to the official appraisal mechanisms of the state.

iii) **Quality Assurance**: To work with senior leadership as well as individual departments to build HOD’s capacities to introduce and consolidate monitoring and evaluation structures in all departmental initiatives like workshops and trainings. This is with a view to ensure minimisation of transmission loss as trainings cascade from the state to smaller geographies.

iv) **Partnerships**: To create policy and processes to pair departments with relevant external partners including NGOs, Universities, Service Providers, Other Government Departments, etc. We also hope to put in place tools to monitor and review partnerships and build the MAA staff capacities to initiate, monitor and sustain relationships.

v) **Scaling Best Practices**: To shape the functioning of MAA as a backbone institution identifying, sharing and scaling best practices within the state from various sources.