

22nd March 2021

Board of Trustees' Statement to the Ashoka Faculty

Liberty, which includes the right to express oneself freely, is integral to life itself. Thus institutions, like universities, that seek to enrich life through knowledge and learning are the natural homes of liberty and the freedom of expression. Ashoka University, fashioned as a liberal arts university, has enshrined the freedom of expression in its very ethos. More formally, the rights and responsibilities of faculty to articulate themselves freely is recorded in chapter/section 8 of the Faculty Handbook and Guidelines. There is no reason to rehash these as all of you are familiar with what is put down there. But in the present conjuncture there is the urgent need to reaffirm and elaborate certain aspects of this fundamental pillar of the vision and functioning of Ashoka University. The Founders, even though they have devoted resources and energy to establish Ashoka University have never interfered with, nor do they intend to interfere, with the academic functioning of the university. "Academic functioning" in this context includes not only how and what faculty teach, how they assess, how they are recruited and how they secure tenure but also their freedom to write and speak in their chosen fora and on their chosen themes. While the Founders stand apart from the academic functioning of the University, they also see themselves as being responsible for protecting and upholding the vision and the aims of the University they have helped to establish. To borrow a phrase from the constitutional history of India, the Founders are very conscious of

protecting the “basic structure” of Ashoka University as an institution that offers inclusive liberal education.

To maintain this separation of the academic functioning from the Founders, it is necessary to establish certain protocols and processes. Many of these are already in place in bodies like the Academic Council, the Board of Management and so on. These need to be strengthened and this can only happen through a more intensive consultation within the faculty. If necessary and required, the Founders are open to helping out in the task of strengthening these processes.

There is another very important section of the academic community of Ashoka that need to be brought in here. These are the students of Ashoka who are being taught to think critically and to question and doubt. They also have valid concerns about their freedom of expression and the need to be heard by various decision-making bodies. The Founders are conscious of this.

Once again, the Founders want to articulate their deep commitment and respect for the autonomy of the University and its academic functioning. With this in mind the Founders are supportive of the appointment of the Ombudsperson (as had been decided earlier) by 31st May 2021. The Chancellor and Vice Chancellor will propose candidates for this position for approval by the Governing Body.

Our aim is that through this and already existing processes we will be able to ensure that Ashoka lives up to its vision of being a space for free enquiry, free expression, intellectual honesty, respect for the dignity of all human beings and openness to constructive change. All this cannot, of course, be achieved overnight. Ashoka will always be a work in progress. The present moment provides an opportunity to make a fresh start by collectively reaffirming our faith in the vision and ethos of Ashoka. We seek to work together to make Ashoka not only one of the best universities in the world but also an institution that makes a difference to the world.

Ashish Dhawan, Pramath Raj Sinha, Sanjeev Bikhchandani, Vineet Gupta

On behalf of the Board of Trustees