

23rd March 2021

**Board of Trustees' Statement to the Ashoka Student Body**

The students of Ashoka are the lifeblood of the university. They enrich it every day with their brilliance, energy and sense of community. They are living proof of Ashoka's mission to build a world-class multidisciplinary university in India.

The Founders are grateful to the students for today's interaction, and would like to reiterate that they are committed to strengthening student trust which is central to the university. They have taken note of student concerns on the protection of free speech and the need to be heard by various decision-making bodies. They are deeply appreciative of the passion and commitment Ashoka's students display in ample measure.

Based on our recent dialogue with Student Government and the wider student body, the Founders are taking prompt action to make certain structural changes that incorporate your voice.

**A. Freedom of Expression**

The Founders reaffirm their commitment to the existing Ashoka University Policy for Freedom of Expression, which states the following:

*Ashoka University stands for and advocates academic freedom and freedom of speech and expression. All members of the University – students, staff and faculty – as members of the University are free to express their individual or collective views and*

*opinions. Such views and opinions, however are not the views and opinions of Ashoka University as an institution.*

### **B. Student Voice**

The Founders are committed to listening to student voice so that voices aren't just spoken but heard, considered and factored into decision making.

1. The Student Government to meet with the Governing Body for a one-hour session twice a year.
2. Attendance of a student observer (President of the Student Government or their alternate) in Board of Management meetings, for relevant agenda items as determined by the Vice-Chancellor.
3. An annual town hall with the Founders where the students can interact with them freely.
4. Set up an email-based feedback process for students to communicate their suggestions and concerns.

### **C. Founder role**

Ashoka is still in its early stages of development and will require the involvement of Founders for at least the next two decades. The Founders affirm that they will have no intervention in the academic functioning of the university. The Board of Trustees has issued a statement to the faculty body on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2021, declaring their commitment to academic freedom, which explicitly states the following:

*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.*

#### **D. Ombudsperson**

The Ombudsperson is an already approved position which will be an impartial and independent person, accessible to all members of the Ashoka community. The Ombudsperson will provide informal guidance to resolve issues raised by Ashokans.

Students will be welcome to contact the university Ombudsperson for unbiased assistance to resolve their concerns. The Ombudsperson will be appointed by 31<sup>st</sup> May 2021.

### **Additional Matters**

1. The Founders will provide all possible assistance as requested by the administration to strengthen Ashoka's international partnerships.
2. The Founders are supportive of the Vice-Chancellor and students' ongoing efforts to improve worker welfare.

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 collectively reaffirm our faith in the vision and ethos of Ashoka. We seek to work together with students, staff and faculty to make Ashoka not only one of the world's best universities 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