

# Building Foundations for Inclusive Higher Education



**Conclave 2.0**  
**27th September, 2024**

## **Conclave 2.0:**

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#### **Background:**

In August 2023, a group of universities, organisations and NGOs keen on deliberating on the challenges of inclusive higher education for students with disabilities in India met at Ashoka University at a conclave organized by the Office of Learning Support (OLS). The group deliberated on ‘The Future of Disability Inclusion in Higher Education’ and identified key gap areas that need work. A year forward, in September 2024, OLS hosted “*Conclave 2.0: Building Foundations for Inclusive Higher Education*” to continue the conversation that started last year.

Conclave 2.0 built upon the ideas enlisted in the White Paper released from the deliberations of the previous meeting and expanded its reach to a wider range of higher education institutes (HEIs). This was done by fostering the power of peer learning by having partner-led sessions on their areas of specialisation and building micro roadmaps and action plans for the different themes identified.

The key themes that were explored in Conclave 2.0 included addressing policy gaps in inclusive higher education, building support structures and reasonable accommodation frameworks at HEIs, strengthening accessible library systems and educational content accessibility, facilitating access to assistive technology for students in higher education - availability and training access and, making faculty the agents of inclusive teaching in classrooms.

The event saw participation from over 100 key stakeholders in government, academia, and industry.

#### **Summary of Proceedings:**

##### **Welcoming and Setting the Stage**

Ms. Reena Gupta, Director, Office of Learning Support, began by extending a warm welcome to all attendees and introducing the event's purpose. She emphasized the significance and the university's intention of partnering with like-minded individuals and institutions for building foundations for inclusive higher education institutions (HEIs).

Prof. Somak Raychaudhury, Vice Chancellor of Ashoka University, in his welcome address shared the experiences of Ashoka University completing a decade of excellence. He emphasized the university's commitment to making all aspects of education accessible and

shared his thoughts on the value of diversity to make this possible. He went on to further state that Ashoka is home to students with diverse physical disabilities and neurodiverse abilities, and with the help of the Office of Learning Support, it creates an inclusive and seamless learning environment for all. Currently, at least 3% of its student body comprises students with disabilities.

### **Plenary Session**

The Plenary session consisted of government representatives who spoke about the urgent need to improve inclusion and accessibility in Indian education for students with disabilities. They emphasized the need to focus on reducing dropout rates, fostering empathy, and enhancing teacher training and policies. The thoughts shared by speakers are presented below.

#### **Dr Pankaj Mittal (Secretary, Association of Indian Universities)**

Dr Mittal spoke about the challenges in India, where many students drop out due to the lack of accessible resources such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of support services, financial constraints and stigma associated with disabilities. Changing mindsets is essential to bring about a shift. Higher authorities often deprioritize issues related to policies for persons with disabilities, and these are taken lightly. Dr. Mittal emphasised on empathy being crucial to building inclusion.

Dr Pankaj Mittal shared how inclusivity is a key focus of the National Education Policy (NEP), particularly for students with disabilities (SwDs). She discussed how in higher education, the representation of SWDs varies significantly: 14.5% in the USA, 12.5% in the UK, but only 0.5% in India. She emphasized the need for changing societal mindsets and fostering empathy to address these issues and increase representation of SwDs in India.

#### **Ms. Rina Sonowal Kouli (Joint Secretary, Ministry of Higher Education)**

Ms. Rina Sonowal stated as part of the NEP mandate to support underrepresented groups, the Ministry has initiated efforts to sensitize faculty across institutions about the challenges faced by students with disabilities, including both visible and invisible ones. Guided by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act and UGC guidelines, these initiatives aim to enhance understanding of disability learning and create inclusive educational environments. While infrastructural changes have been implemented for students with physical disabilities, fostering faculty awareness through targeted campaigns and interventions remains crucial. Additionally, it was mentioned that mental health campaigns were being prioritized to address the diverse needs of students and promote overall well-being.

#### **Dr Jagdish Arora (Advisor, National Board of Accreditation)**

Dr. Jagdish Arora noted that funding has been allocated to universities for infrastructural improvements, such as ramps, and for teacher training to support students with special needs, particularly through programs like TEPSI (Teacher Education for Persons with Special

Needs). However, he discussed that while universities are accredited, they are not ranked based on inclusivity, and despite available measures, the impact remains minimal. Libraries are gradually becoming more accessible through e-books, audiobooks, and text-to-speech technologies, with emerging innovations like brain-computer interaction offering the potential for enhanced accessibility. Yet, improvements in policies and spaces for their implementation are still needed to drive substantial progress.

Dr R.K. Chadha (Ex-Additional Secretary at Parliament of India, Lok Sabha)

Dr R.K. Chadha addressed the government's approach to inclusivity and accessibility for students with disabilities in education, highlighting that disability issues have rarely been integrated into the system despite advocacy efforts. A staggering 45% of persons with disabilities (PwDs) in India are illiterate, and while guidelines for inclusive education exist, implementation at the base level remains weak. Government policies have largely focused on SC, ST, and OBC communities, often neglecting PwDs.

He emphasized that making websites and materials from prominent universities accessible, and comprehensive teacher training programs are essential to support students with specific disabilities. Additionally, libraries should work on their space, software, and hardware to better serve PwDs, while also ensuring these resources remain open to all students. Dr Chadha further went on to emphasize the need for every government ministry to have a dedicated cell for PwDs and for universities to be ranked based on how well they accommodate underrepresented groups.

Ms Ipsita Mitra (Deputy Secretary, Policy, Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities & Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment)

Ms. Ipsita Mitra discussed the shift from viewing support for PwDs as a welfare measure to recognizing it as a right under the 2016 RPwD Act. Key focus areas included improving inclusivity in primary education and expanding scholarships for undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD programs. She discussed how the government is also providing scholarships to PwDs pursuing STEM education from Class 9 onwards, and that although scholarships are available for PhD and MPhil programs, there is limited financial support for studying abroad.

Ms Ipsita Mitra discussed that the five-year plan by the Government of India aims to increase scholarships and incentivize STEM education for PwDs. They aim to fund Sugamya Pustakalaya, an accessible library platform, as well as sign language resources for hearing-impaired students. Along with this, the government is also aiming to introduce sign language materials in NCERT books from Class 1 onwards. Despite these advancements, students with disabilities rarely have the opportunity to engage in higher studies.

In conclusion, the speakers emphasized the urgent need to enhance inclusion and accessibility in Indian education for students with disabilities. They highlighted the importance of addressing barriers, fostering empathy, and improving teacher training, policies, and

innovations. Effective implementation, including dedicated cells for PwDs and accessible university resources, is essential. The shift from treating disability support as welfare to a rights-based approach under the 2016 RPwD Act, with a focus on scholarships, STEM education, and accessible resources, is critical. Overall, it is not enough to only write policies, but effectively implementing them is crucial for creating an effective inclusive education ecosystem in India.

### **Launch of the Baseline Mapping Report**

A report titled “Access to Higher Education: An Unresolved Challenge for Students with Disabilities” was unveiled by Prof. Somak Raychaudhury, Ms Chandana Singh, Founder, Ashoka University, Ms Neha Trivedi, Founder, Spandan, Inclusion and Accessibility Consultancy and Ms Reena Gupta. The report examines the barriers students with disabilities face in accessing higher education. The report highlights the impediments caused by ableist-minded social structures in enabling young people with disabilities to aspire and think freely. It identifies the need for early intervention to overcome challenges and also highlights program design ideas for Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and other stakeholders to address these issues. The report is the outcome of a qualitative baseline mapping study conducted with cross-disability sector leaders in the space of inclusion. The report can be found on [this link](#).

### **Idea Labs**

At Conclave 1.0 some of the key gap areas for building inclusive higher education were identified. These included stigma, lack of support services, scarcity of trained professionals, and non-compliance with policies. The need was felt to work towards policy standardization, greater representation of PwDs, strengthening training and sensitization across stakeholders, and building shared knowledge in the sector. To begin with, Conclave 2.0 aimed to start the process of building shared knowledge in four areas – i) building support structures and reasonable accommodation frameworks at HEIs; ii) enhancing accessible library systems and education content accessibility; iii) facilitating access to assistive technology at higher education, and iv) fostering faculty sensitization for a more inclusive campus. Conclave 2.0 featured four dedicated Idea Labs that explored each of these themes in detail.

#### **Idea Lab 1: Building Support Structures and Reasonable Accommodation Frameworks at HEIs**

*This Idea Lab was presented by Ms. Reena Gupta, Director of the Office of Learning Support at Ashoka University.*

The Idea Lab explored the broad scope of academic accommodations in higher education institutions (HEIs), emphasizing the need for support in three key areas: academics, social



environments, and campus experiences. Ms. Gupta further went on to elaborate on how academic accommodations should include extended exam times, curriculum modifications, scribes, and assistive devices. Social support should involve campus buddies, roommates, and counselling. Campus infrastructure must include all kinds of accessibility, from dining halls to residential halls, transportation and more.

This session stressed the importance of raising awareness about accessible universities and tailoring accommodations to specific needs. The inputs discussed how effective inclusion requires coordination across departments, from dining to sports, and how a dedicated office for disability support is crucial. The conversation concluded with a reminder that inclusive education is a legal mandate.

### **Idea Lab 2: Strengthening Accessible Library Systems and Educational Content Accessibility**

*This Idea Lab was presented by Dr Homiyar Mobedji, Director Programmes - Benetech (Asia and Africa)*

This Idea Lab brought attention to the gap of many educational boards failing to provide accessible textbooks for students with print disabilities. Dr. Mobedji stated that it is critical to ensure that educational content is made accessible from the beginning. It should be "born accessible", reducing the need to adjust later in the future.

Dr. Mobedji emphasized the value of independent learning and exam writing, along with mobility training and real-world preparation for students with disabilities. Systemic changes, such as accessible library search portals and accessible question papers, could take time but are necessary for progress in these areas. He discussed how faculty should ensure that any shared digital formats, such as soft copies of textbooks, should be made accessible, and include alt text to visuals that would ensure that students with visual impairments can engage with the material provided to them.

He advocated for technologies like Seeing AI and Be My Eyes that can empower students to create their own accessible content, while tools like Google Transcribe can assist those with hearing impairments in classroom settings. Library search portals should be fully accessible to make the book search process easier for all students. Providing technological device access at the individual student level would promote their regular use, and can foster growth and self-reliance.

### **Idea Lab 3: Facilitating Access to Assistive Technology for Students in Higher Education - Availability and Training Access**

*This Idea Lab was presented by Dr Piyush Chanana, NCAHT, IIT Delhi.*

The Idea Lab focused on how different types of disabilities come with their unique challenges, but simple solutions often exist to address them. One major barrier, however, is the lack of awareness around these solutions. Although assistive technologies are available, adequate training on how to use them is frequently neglected. To address this, Dr. Chanana showcased solutions like screen readers, magnifiers, live captioning, voice access and other such assistive technologies. He further emphasized that proper training is often missing in many institutions to make such tools accessible for all students.

To improve access, colleges can use tools like OneNote for organization and accessible book platforms like Bookshare. If books aren't accessible, student volunteers can help. Institutions should establish assistive technology labs equipped with assistive technology tools to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and many such technologies.

#### **Idea Lab 4: Making Faculty Agents of Inclusive Teaching in Classrooms**

*This Idea Lab was presented by Prof Kade Finoff, Professor, Azim Premji University.*

The Idea Lab elaborated on how faculty should create diverse, multimedia learning opportunities and design flexible, inclusive courses that accommodate various disabilities. Ms Finoff stated that incorporating Universal Design for Learning and providing multimodal content can ensure accessibility for all students.

She emphasized that barriers in course design often prevent the full integration of reasonable academic accommodations. It is crucial to adapt learning practices to truly fulfill the spirit of reasonable accommodations. One effective approach shared was the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocates for offering educational material in multiple formats—digital, audio, and others—so that all students can engage according to their strengths. The key principles of UDL of multiple means of engagement, representation and participation were shared.

She discussed how faculty members are sometimes hesitant to move away from traditional teaching methods, and hence understanding the individual needs of both students and faculty could be the key to fostering a more inclusive educational environment where everyone can collaborate effectively.

#### **Key Takeaways and Way Forward:**

The discussions during the course of the day have reinforced the need for collaborative work in the sector across all stakeholders. There is a clear and urgent need to advocate with government machinery to bring stronger compliance frameworks and a greater level of cohesion between inclusive educational guidelines, accreditation systems and compliance mechanisms.

To ensure effective delivery on the ground, a clear policy to build disability offices in colleges with staff appointed exclusively for implementing inclusive education and reasonable accommodation services needs to be set up. Systematic public-private partnership models can be explored to make this possible.

Conclave 2.0 has been the bridge between Conclave 1.0 and what lies ahead. This year's deliberations were curated to take work to the next level. During the Idea Labs, participants were introduced to forming working groups for each theme. These groups will be structured as micro-action plan working groups. Each theme discussed in Idea Labs has specific areas that need immediate and urgent groundwork and collaborative work. The working groups will be facilitated to take up these issues between Conclave 2.0 and Conclave 3.0. The aspiration is that the Conclave transforms from being an annual to a consortium in the space of inclusive higher education where HEIs and stakeholders can actively collaborate, build partnerships and set standards for the sector. We hope that this work through the year will become the basis of planning the deliberations of Conclave 3.0.

In addition, given the gap between policy and implementation highlighted during the deliberations at Conclave 2.0, one also aims to build an effective advocacy program in the space to engage with government machinery. The working groups can become the germinating spaces for identifying key advocacy issues and the consortium as it evolves can become an active advocate with the government. We hope to build a positive, vibrant and continuous dialogue space with the government to ensure that inclusive higher education can become an effective reality on the ground.

Conclave 2.0 concluded with participants looking forward to a fruitful year of collaborative work ahead.





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