

## CONCLAVE 3.0

# Advancing Together A Networked Approach to Inclusive Higher Education



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## Conclave 3.0:

### Advancing Together: A Networked Approach to Inclusive Higher Education 2025 Report

#### Background

What began in 2023 as a focused discussion convened by the Office of Learning Support (OLS) at Ashoka University has grown into a national platform driving systemic change in inclusive higher education. Over three editions, the Conclave has evolved from an exchange of ideas into a sustained, collaborative movement bringing together higher education institutions (HEIs), policy advocates, practitioners, and experts.

Building on the momentum of Conclave 2.0 in 2024, which emphasised “Building Foundations for Inclusive Higher Education,” the past year saw the creation of four Idea Lab Groups composed of Conclave participants. These groups worked collectively on critical themes, including developing robust support structures and reasonable accommodation frameworks, strengthening accessible library systems and educational content, enabling access to assistive technology, and positioning faculty as key agents of inclusive teaching.

“**Conclave 3.0: Advancing Together: A Networked Approach to Inclusive Higher Education**” marked the culmination of this collaborative journey and the launch of a new phase of action. It brought together stakeholders from across the country to share the outcomes of the Idea Labs, unveil an open-source database designed to help institutions strengthen their inclusive practices, and expand the Inclusive University Alliance into a wider national network. The discussions also addressed policy advocacy to influence national approaches to inclusive higher education, highlighted faculty-led strategies for inclusive pedagogy, presented step-by-step guidance on integrating assistive technology, and explored approaches to ensuring campus placements are accessible and equitable.

More than a conference, Conclave 3.0 represented the consolidation of shared vision into concrete tools, networks, and strategies. It reaffirmed the Conclave’s role as a catalyst for collective action, a hub for knowledge exchange, and a driver of national progress, setting the stage for a future where inclusion is not an aspiration but a defining feature of higher education in India.

#### Summary of Proceedings

##### Setting the Context and Opening Addresses

*Ms. Reena Gupta, Senior Director of OLS*, traced the office’s journey from its inception a decade ago—born out of early conversations with Ashoka’s senior leadership to support students with invisible disabilities—to its current role as a comprehensive support system for students with diverse disabilities. She reflected on how sustained collaboration with campus stakeholders has shaped OLS, and how the Conclave has evolved: from the inaugural 2023 Conclave’s discussion and white paper on systemic gaps, to the 2024 shift towards collective

action through the creation of Idea Labs and the Inclusive University Alliance. Emphasising the Conclave's spirit, she noted, *“real progress happens only when we advance together.”*

*Prof. Somak Raychaudhury, Vice Chancellor of Ashoka University*, reinforced the institution's belief that access must be coupled with a deep commitment to inclusion. He noted OLS's role in enabling students with both visible and invisible disabilities to participate fully in campus life, and highlighted Ashoka's outreach beyond its campus to engage with other institutions and government bodies on inclusive practices.

*Dr. Pramath Raj Sinha, Founder and Chairman of Ashoka's Board of Trustees*, shared a personal reflection on inclusion through the story of Ashoka's first visually impaired student. Admitting him, despite the university's initial lack of preparedness, became a turning point that inspired the building of infrastructure and a stronger commitment to accessibility. Drawing attention to India's upcoming wave of campus development, he urged that accessibility be integrated from the outset.

### **Policy-Resources-Networks: Triad to Building an Inclusive Higher Education Ecosystem in India**

Ms. Reena Gupta shared the learnings and progress made over the past year, highlighting gaps, needs and the way forward with the message that policy, resources, and networks must come together to build a truly inclusive ecosystem. She emphasised that while policies signal intent for inclusion, without proper resources and collective networks, they remain ineffective. Similarly, while strong frameworks exist, implementation is inconsistent—reasonable accommodations are often left to individual faculty, assistive technology rooms are underfunded, awareness of invisible disabilities is limited, and monitoring of UGC guidelines is weak. Departmental approaches also tend to be fragmented.

Among the recommendations presented were mandatory disability inclusion training for all faculty and staff, dedicated disability support offices in every higher education institution, a Ministry of Education working group with external experts and the IUA, and co-created, standardised frameworks to ensure consistent and accountable practices nationwide.

### **Launch of IdeaPal, an Open-Source Database for Building Inclusive HEIs**

A defining moment of Conclave 3.0 was the launch of IdeaPal, a first-of-its-kind open-source database collectively developed by the Idea Labs groups, in collaboration with Inclusive University Alliance, OLS and Spandan. IdeaPal offers a living blueprint for building inclusive campuses in higher education. Designed to be freely accessible to all institutions, it is a dynamic and evolving platform that equips universities with practical tools, models, and strategies to embed inclusion into their infrastructure and practices. IdeaPal represents a collective commitment to ensure that every institution, regardless of scale or location, has the means to make higher education accessible to all.

### **Keynote Address**

*Shri Rajesh Aggarwal, Secretary, DEPwD, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, called for inclusion driven by intent and action, not just policy. He urged that most children belong in mainstream schools, warning that placing capable students in special schools can limit their potential. Progress is visible in CBSE's move to allow blind students to use laptops for exams and CUET's revised accommodations after initial gaps, but barriers remain—many state boards still bar computer use for blind students.*

The address affirmed that science can be taught accessibly to blind students, that ADHD is a legitimate disability, and that accommodations enable equity rather than grant sympathy. Deaf students continue to be left behind, making technology and AI tools, such as classroom content summarisation, essential where sign language support is lacking. Shri Aggarwal reaffirmed that true inclusion is possible when commitment meets innovation, ensuring no learner is left behind. He motivated all present to “*walk together towards a future where inclusion is not the exception but the norm.*”

### **Invited Talk**

In his talk, *Shri Sunil Kumar Barnwal, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Education, said, “With over 4.5 crore students, India is home to the world's largest higher education system, and it is our collective responsibility to ensure that every student has the opportunity to succeed.”* Further to this, he spoke about how inclusive education needs greater visibility and dialogue within HEIs, as students with disabilities can thrive when provided with the right support and accommodations. He emphasised that institutions must create enabling ecosystems, sharing that identification of learning disabilities remains limited, even in elite spaces. Faculty and staff require training to recognise and address diverse needs, supported by high-level experts. Every institution should have a dedicated office for inclusion and diversity, Shri Barnwal stated, while bodies such as the NTA must ensure accessibility and accommodations during entrance exams. As higher education remains an aspirational pursuit for students with disabilities, inclusion must be embedded within its very framework.

### **IdeaPal and IUA: Resources and Networks to Build Your Inclusive Education Program**

In this informative session, *Ms. Neha Trivedi, Founder, Spandan: Inclusion and Accessibility Consultancy Services, introduced IdeaPal as an evolving, community-driven resource hub designed to support the implementation of inclusive education across Indian higher education institutions, offering tools, examples, and best practices co-created by members. She further shared details about Inclusive University Alliance (IUA), a dynamic network of higher education institutions, partner organisations, and higher education professionals in India, united by a shared commitment to advancing inclusive higher education. She outlined its vision, the different membership types, the current member base, and how interested institutions or individuals can join.*

## **Bridging Systems: Partnerships for Lifelong Inclusion**

*Mr. Ajay Gupta, Co-Founder, Rishihood University*, highlighted key principles for advancing inclusive education. He stressed that inclusion must begin early, fostering a sense of belonging that enables learners to realise their full potential. He spoke about building a culture grounded in dignity and belonging, where respect and acceptance are embedded in every interaction—within the university and beyond. The speaker drew focus to the need to empower faculty as champions of inclusion, leveraging technology as a tool that truly serves learners, and enabling a continuum of inclusion that extends across the learner's life.

## **Assistive Technology (AT) Integration**

*Shiva Jayagopal and Akila Sankar, Founders of WinVinaya Foundation*, highlighted how assistive technology (AT) is central to building inclusion in higher education, emphasizing that one size does not fit all—while people with low vision may use magnifiers, those who are blind often rely on screen readers like NVDA, and individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing may turn to sign language or lip-reading. They introduced the 5 As Framework of AT, which calls for creating awareness through small but crucial accommodations, building acumen by offering skills in accessible formats and leveraging AI, ensuring accessibility through resources such as ISL videos and STEM books in accessible versions, conducting holistic assessments to match individuals with the right AT, and prioritizing affordability to guarantee independence through cost-effective devices. Their message underscored that personalised, affordable, and accessible technology is essential to ensuring that persons with disabilities can both belong and contribute.

## **Faculty Perspectives**

The faculty panel brought together diverse perspectives on inclusive classrooms in higher education. *Prof. Bhuvaneswari B., Faculty at Azim Premji University*, reflected on the shift from deficit-based language to strength-based approaches to neurodivergence. *Prof. Aalok Thakkar, Faculty at Ashoka University*, shared how redesigning introductory computer science courses for students with visual impairments demonstrates that accessibility can preserve rigor while benefiting all learners. *Prof. Someshwar Sati, Faculty at Kirori Mal College, Delhi University*, emphasized that inclusion must extend beyond academics to social engagement and called for mainstreaming Disability Studies into curricula. *Dr. Nandini Chatterjee, Cognitive Neuroscientist and Faculty at Ashoka University*, highlighted the brain's natural variability, urging multimodal teaching and the use of technology as an assistive tool. *Prof. Vikram Singh, Faculty at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi*, discussed bridging research and pedagogy to advance inclusive practices. Collectively, the session reinforced faculty leadership as central to creating classrooms of dignity, flexibility, and belonging.

## **Inclusive Campus Placement**

Conclave 3.0 brought to the fore the often-overlooked issue of campus placements for students with disabilities, emphasizing the need for collaboration between placement offices, disability support offices, and industry. Speakers including *Ms. Trupti Sridhar, Diversity Programs Advisor, Dell Technologies*, *Mr. Krishna Warriar, Accessibility & Inclusion Consultant*, *Mr. Jatin Seth, Director, Career Development Office, Ashoka University*, and *Mr. P Rajasekharan, Co-founder, V-shesh* shared insights on inclusive hiring practices—ranging from internship models to tailored placement ecosystems—and highlighted what companies seek from campuses to enable equitable opportunities. The session also introduced a corporate diversity hiring toolkit, offering structured guidance for institutions and recruiters seeking to embed accessibility in their hiring processes. Audience discussions underscored the importance of data sharing and clear campus-level points of contact, with the Inclusive University Alliance positioned to carry this dialogue forward. The session reaffirmed that true inclusion in higher education must extend beyond classrooms into meaningful career pathways.

## **Key Takeaways and Way Forward**

Conclave 3.0 strengthened the message that inclusive higher education cannot be achieved through isolated efforts—it requires policies backed by resources, faculty leadership, institutional commitment, and industry collaboration. Across sessions, speakers brought to the fore that inclusion must extend beyond classrooms into campus life and career pathways, with technology, pedagogy, and networks working in tandem. The central message was clear: accessibility and dignity are not supplementary goals, but essential elements of educational excellence.

The way forward will be anchored in the growth of the Inclusive University Alliance (IUA) and the expansion of IdeaPal. IUA will serve as a national platform connecting higher education institutions, practitioners, and partners to co-create strategies, strengthen institutional capacity, and influence policy at scale. IdeaPal, designed as a dynamic open-source database, will continue to evolve as a practical resource, offering frameworks, tools, and examples for embedding inclusive practices across campuses. Together, these two initiatives mark the next chapter of the Conclave journey—turning collective dialogue into systemic transformation and ensuring that inclusive higher education in India becomes both sustainable and scalable.



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