



OFFICE OF
LEARNING
SUPPORT

PIONEERING
DISABILITY
SERVICES
IN HIGHER
EDUCATION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

It takes a village	1	Celebrating abilities in STEM	17
Letter from the Vice-Chancellor	2	Envisioning a brighter future	18
Building inclusive mindsets	3	Understanding invisible disabilities	19
Changing the narrative around disabilities	4	Ashoka. LSE. EY	20
Our vision	5	Key initiatives	21
What makes us unique	6	Events and awareness campaigns	22
What we do	7	A culture of allyship	23
All in a day's work	8	Leading the conversation on dyslexia and inclusion	24
Learning support for all	9	Advocating inclusive hiring	25
Student engagement journey	10		
OLS through the years	12	Larger impact	26
Capacity building for India	14	The way forward	27
Mentoring students with autism	16	Contact the OLS	28



Viewing disability: an artwork by Ishani Shenoy, Undergraduate 2024. Ishani was diagnosed with dyslexia by the OLS

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

The All India Survey on Higher Education 2018-19 reports that only 0.23 per cent of 37 million students in higher education have a disability, confirming low enrolment. These numbers clearly indicate the enormity of the challenge in bringing students with disabilities into the higher education system. Many of them discontinue their education after high school owing to several barriers. These include, limited availability of resources and support systems, and lack of awareness about their strengths and capabilities.

A systemic change across different levels of educational institutions as well as regulatory frameworks is needed to harness the abilities of these students. Challenging the status quo, this is precisely what Ashoka University has initiated through the Office of Learning Support (OLS).

This document captures the pioneering work that the OLS has been doing to support students with disabilities at the University. It has also been a catalyst for inclusive practices and capacity building across the educational ecosystem in India.



LETTER FROM THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

Ashoka University aspires to provide learning, discovery, and mentorship of the highest level for each student. The living experience of its campus encourages friendships and participation. This quest for excellence and empowerment will not succeed if it cannot include young people who need to overcome challenges to reach their full potential.

Challenges of visual and auditory impairment as well as locomotor dysfunctionality are evident to all. Less visible are the challenges of dyslexia or dyscalculia which are caused by different ways in which the brain orders sensations. People with challenges such as these also have the potential to excel.

The Office of Learning Support (OLS) at Ashoka – a unique initiative in Indian higher education, which, today, is a guide and role model for other institutions – is committed to helping students with such challenges. They need understanding as well as practical tools and facilities of many kinds. The OLS supports each student with challenges even as it strives to find newer and better modes of assistance.

Malabika Sarkar

Vice-Chancellor

Ashoka University

(August 2019 - January 2023)



BUILDING INCLUSIVE MINDSETS

I invite you to experience a journey that is one-of-a-kind in Indian higher education.

With 15-20 per cent of the student population in India estimated to have some form of a disability, making college education accessible to all has been a need for years. Ashoka, with its commitment to diversity, addressed this gap with the OLS. The idea was to create an inclusive space on campus for students with physical disabilities as well as neurodiverse learners.

When we started seven years ago, there was no model in India to emulate. Over the years, the office has earned the reputation of conducting pioneering work, with other premier colleges and universities looking to collaborate with us.

At this stage, we need collective efforts to achieve a larger impact across the country, and each one of us has a critical role to play in realising this ambition.

This report will give you a glimpse of our journey of creating inclusive spaces and more importantly, inclusive mindsets. I hope you enjoy reading it.

Reena Gupta

Director

Office of Learning Support



CHANGING THE NARRATIVE AROUND DISABILITIES

It was years ago that I got the opportunity to be a part of Ashoka University. At that time, awareness and understanding of learning challenges was fairly rudimentary in India. Not many were even aware of what learning disabilities are, let alone how to diagnose and support such students.

The journey of students with learning challenges has daily struggles. They encounter difficulties with the typical modes of teaching, parental expectations, peer pressure, and continuous disappointments despite putting in the effort. However, with the right accommodations and environment, students learn to cope and can move forward towards reaching their goals. It was therefore evident that inclusion and support for those with learning challenges must be a part of university education.

This was in complete consonance with Ashoka's progressive philosophy. And so, the OLS was born. At the time, it was envisioned as a centre that would support students with learning disabilities by acting as an important bridge between school and the workplace. Once the student reaches the workforce as confident individual with their self-esteem intact, they are able to contribute with their talent, creativity and intelligence. The support we received from Ashoka was very timely, and it changed the narrative around disabilities.

Not only does the OLS nurture students at Ashoka, but it has also taken the mission further by organising high-impact programmes and holding discussions with global thought leaders.

I am confident that OLS will help create a more empathetic society – one in which every neurodiverse learner has an equal opportunity!

Chandana Singh

Lawyer and Special Educator
Founder, Ashoka University



OUR VISION

The vision of the OLS is to create an environment of equity, inclusivity, and diversity on the Ashoka campus. The office aims to promote an inclusive culture that accepts disability as diversity and learning differences as a matter of everyday life.

The mission is to engage the entire Ashoka community to enable equitable access to education for all learners.



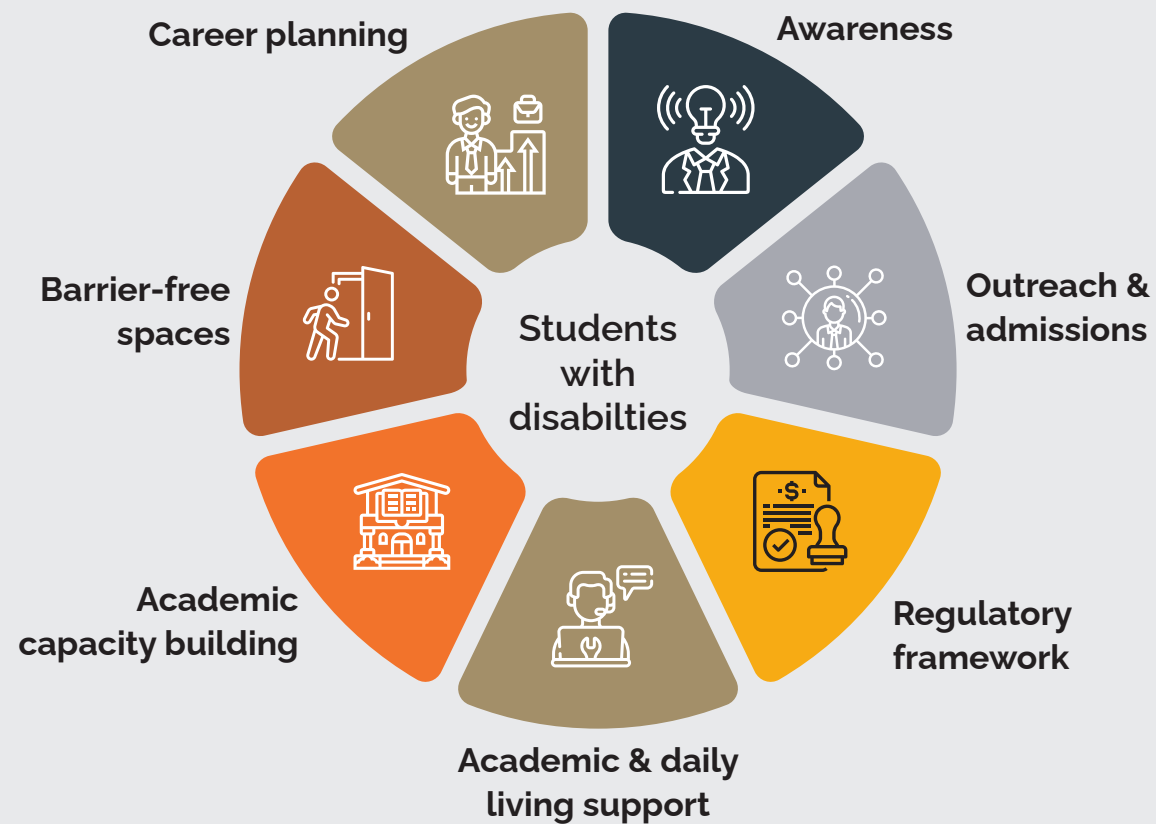
WHAT MAKES US UNIQUE

The OLS is led by professionals with 25 years of experience in disability management and advocacy.



WHAT WE DO

OLS has adopted a multi-pronged strategy to create a level playing field for students with disabilities. It ranges from awareness to daily support to career planning.



ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

OLS offers Ashoka students a variety of support services to help them succeed at university and beyond.

Support for students with disabilities

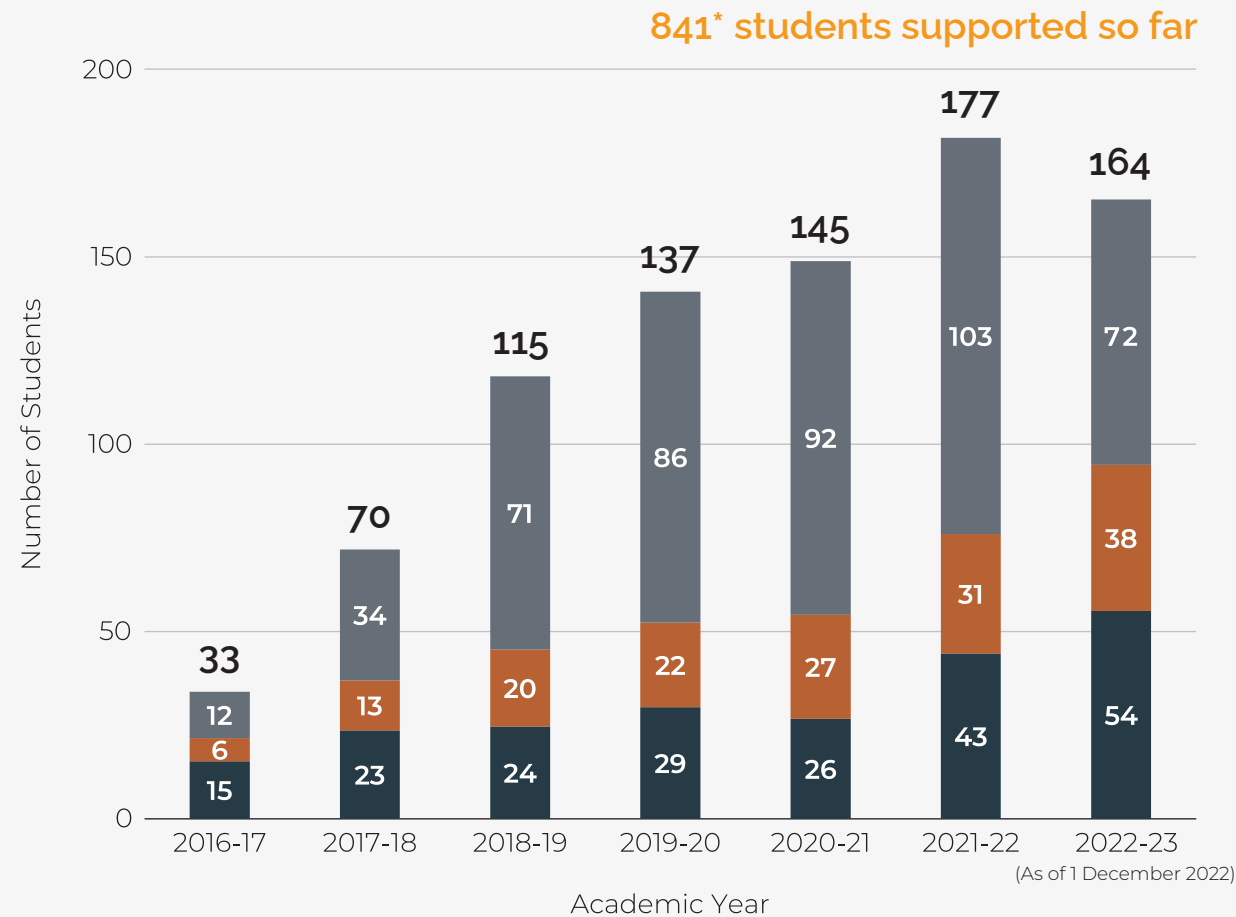
- ▶ Facilitates academic learning and overall campus living experience
- ▶ Recommends physical infrastructure modifications to make the campus accessible
- ▶ Makes content accessible through technology support
- ▶ Implements academic adjustments for an equitable classroom experience
- ▶ Acts as a central resource hub on specific-needs related information for all stakeholders

Support services for all Ashoka students

- ▶ Helps in time management skills and planning
- ▶ Provides effective academic learning strategies
- ▶ Improves overall executive functioning skills like self-management and metacognition
- ▶ Screens for disabilities and needs-based assessment for curriculum



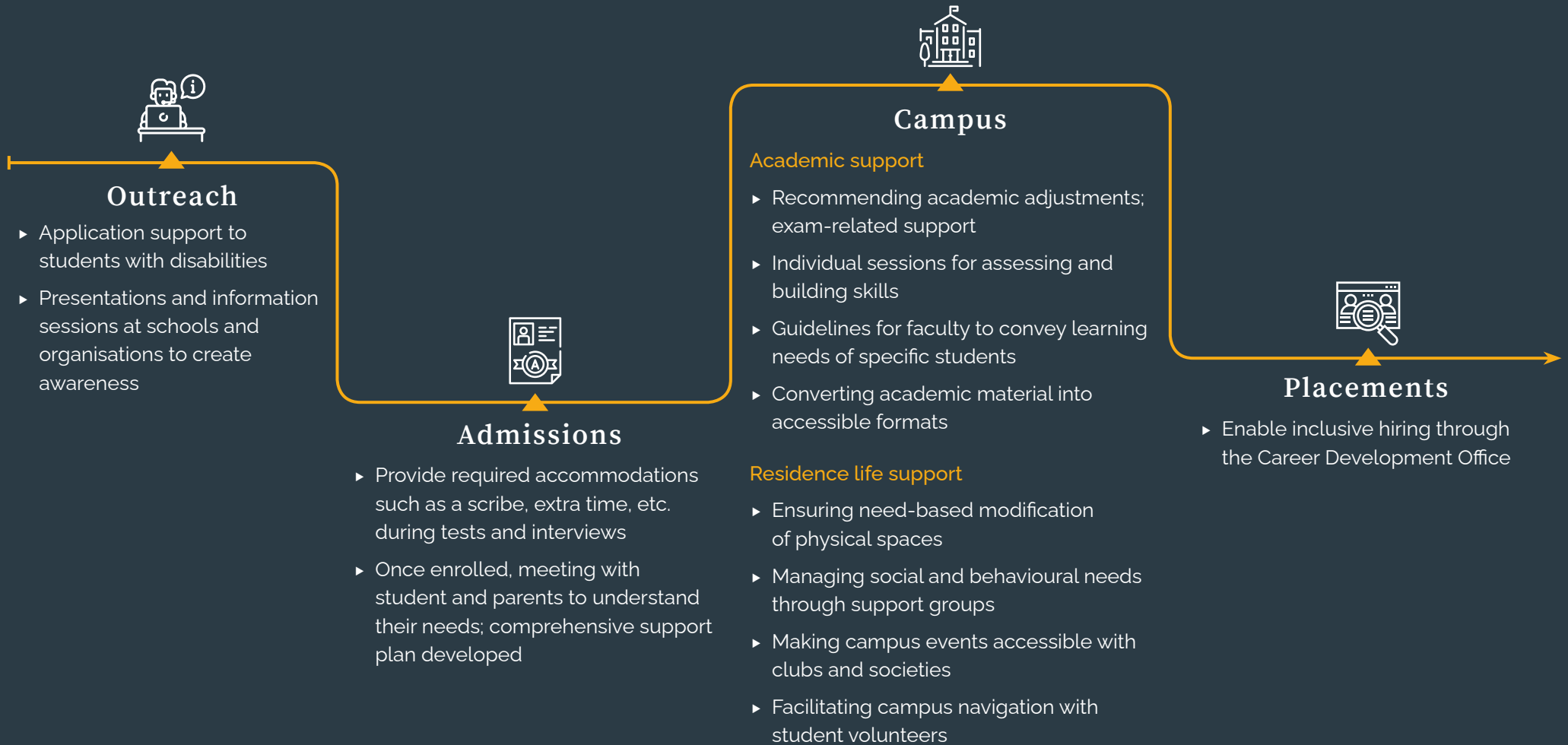
LEARNING SUPPORT FOR ALL



■ Students with documented disabilities ■ Students with undocumented disabilities ■ Students without disabilities who require academic assistance
Includes mental health concerns and English language assistance

* Of this, 502 students are unique as students are provided support over 3-4 years

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT JOURNEY





“The Office of Student Affairs has been actively involved with OLS to ensure that all our events and activities adhere to an inclusive framework. This ranges from campus housing accommodations to capacity-building workshops. But the most important contribution made by OLS is nurturing an environment that foregrounds conversations around disability. Both within the campus community and outside, it has been leading by example in how to shape the higher education discourse from an inclusive lens.”

Deboshruti Roychowdhury

Dean
Office of Student Affairs

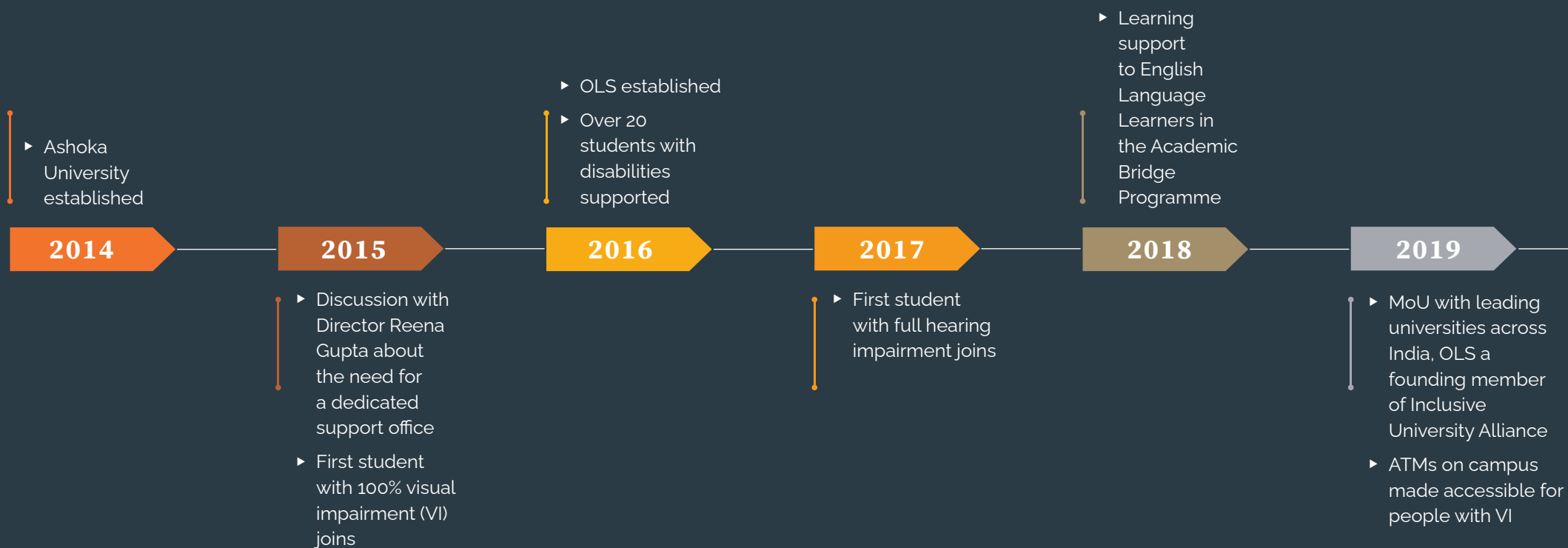


“Over the years, we have had students with various learning and physical disabilities apply to Ashoka. OLS works closely with the admissions team, providing student-specific support at various stages of the application and assessment processes. It also contributes to our Academic Bridge Programme for incoming students who need support with the English language, and with academic reading and writing. It helps us realise our passion to make the Ashoka community more diverse and inclusive.”

Mercia Prince

Director
Office of Admissions

OLS THROUGH THE YEARS



- ▶ Trained students with disabilities in using technology to access classes during COVID-19; resource document for faculty

2020

2021

- ▶ Reena Gupta appointed member of National Committee for Inclusion by AICTE
- ▶ Hosted first ever conference on Higher Education and Dyslexia in India
- ▶ New Ashoka website made accessible
- ▶ UG and YIF application forms made accessible for VI
- ▶ Ashoka's policy on Inclusion of Students with Disabilities implemented

- ▶ Hosted India's first summit on Inclusion in Higher Education
- ▶ 500 students supported so far
- ▶ Collaborating with and guiding other universities in inclusive processes

2022

2023

- ▶ Increase enrolment of students with disabilities from 1% to 2%
- ▶ Constitute an association of like-minded HEIs in NCR to promote inclusive practices
- ▶ Encourage hiring of faculty and staff with disabilities at Ashoka

2024

- ▶ Expand geographical reach of College Readiness Programme (CRP) to other parts of the country
- ▶ Advancing infrastructural accessibility across the two Ashoka campuses
- ▶ Investment in accessibility of sciences content

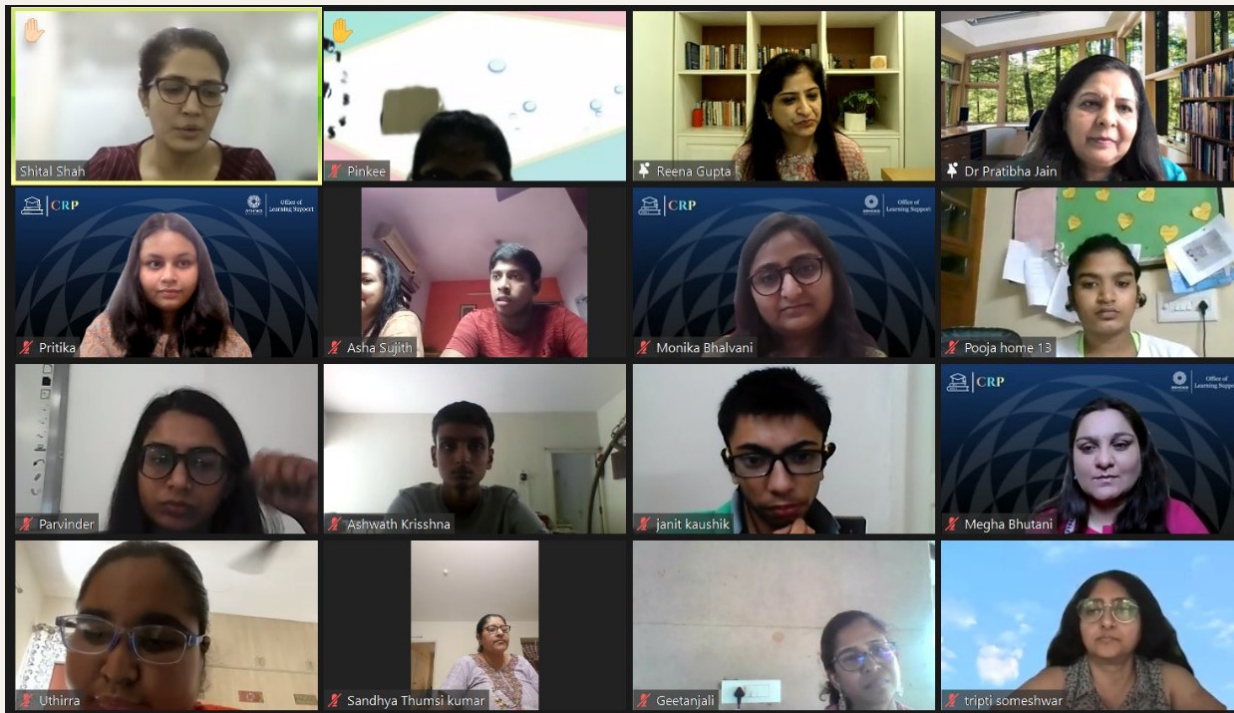
2025

- ▶ Initiate research programmes on disability inclusion
- ▶ Explore collaborations with disability centres of partner universities

CAPACITY BUILDING FOR INDIA

College Readiness Programme

Through its College Readiness Programme (CRP) the OLS is building capacity to strengthen the educational ecosystem for people with disabilities. The programme engages various stakeholders – schools, career counsellors, parents, students, and professionals in a virtual learning series. It equips students with the skills required in higher education and be future-ready.



More than 600 people from 40 cities have benefited from the three editions conducted so far. Each edition is three days long. The main objective of the programme is to increase the enrolment of students with disabilities in higher education, and widening career opportunities for them.

Enabling HEIs for Disability Services

OLS is guiding and sharing best practices followed at Ashoka with institutes like IIT Delhi, Kirori Mal College, Jindal University, and Krea University to support students with disabilities at their respective campuses.

“If we insist on a one-size-fits-all model of instruction and assessment, then we end up removing many, many colours from the rainbow.

If we insist that the only correct mode of instruction and the only correct mode of assessment is orange, then what will happen to the yellow, the red, the blue, the green, the violet?

It’s crucial that all our students have a sense that there are many colours in the palette, that there are many ways of being intelligent, and that one can open up to other ways of thinking, no matter how unconventional these may seem.

Students with learning disabilities are often an asset to the classroom, as they can provide many additional shades of experience, perspective, and critical thinking. Ashoka not only gives these students modes of support — so-called accommodations that allow them to take courses and thrive in them; it also acknowledges that their very presence in the classroom can be an inspiration to other students.”

Jonathan Gil Harris

Professor of English

Ashoka University

MENTORING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

Adopting a person-centred approach is the key to a support system for students with autism. While these students became part of Ashoka community, it was imperative to create a mentorship programme so they can thrive within their environment. The OLS members mentor these students and work closely with their parents, academic departments, and administrative staff.



“My first year at Ashoka was during COVID. So, when I finally came to campus, it felt like a world away. I have never stayed away from my parents so I felt like a completely new person here. Six months later, I feel like I belong here, I know the place better, I know how to manage my workload, manage my housekeeping, manage myself, and also make friends. I feel independent. And more importantly, I feel accepted.”

Maitreya Sukumar
Undergraduate 2024



“The OLS has gone above and beyond to support Rishi (my son who is on the autism spectrum). This has made a tremendous difference in the way he communicates. My reserved son is now quite frank and confident. We look forward to the next phase of his life – his career, where he sets forth armed with the confidence gained from the unconditional support he has received at Ashoka. You have given him wings for life.”

Priya Subramanian
Rishi Krishnaswamy's (Undergraduate 2022) mother

CELEBRATING ABILITIES IN STEM

There are considerable barriers for students with disabilities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Lack of resources and will of educators to go an extra mile leads to poor representation despite students being cognitively capable of pursuing them.

Ashoka is committed to integrating these students into STEM courses, resulting in a paradigm shift of access for all students.



Tanmay Singh is a topper in biology. He has cerebral palsy. He wants to be a sustainability consultant.

“Students like me are typically told to opt for subjects ‘that can be done sitting down’, like literature, that don’t require lab work.

But Ashoka was different. The faculty treated me no differently from other students. They never associated any academic challenges with my disability. They made sure I was included in all activities, including field trips. More importantly, the University helped me broaden my perspective. With its interdisciplinary approach, it made me think about the social impact of science which I hope to delve into.”

Tanmay Singh

Ashoka Scholars Programme 2023

ENVISIONING A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Rahul is visually impaired and comes from a low-income background. He is pursuing computer science at Ashoka and wants to work in fintech.

“Because of my visual disability, my aptitude for computer science was always discouraged.

Ashoka provided me with the necessary support, including financial aid, which made my journey possible. The diverse courses in computer science, entrepreneurship and finance that I am studying here are already preparing me with the necessary skills to be job-ready.”

Rahul Gajare

Undergraduate 2024



UNDERSTANDING INVISIBLE DISABILITIES

Sanjana has cervical radiculopathy. Activities involving upper body usage for prolonged durations (sitting or computer usage) tend to trigger pain. She was provided with off-campus housing facilities apart from academic accommodations.

“Visible disability automatically generates empathy. But, it is hard to convince people when one’s disability is invisible, yet debilitating. From advising me on my academic trajectory, to introducing accessible tech tools and suggesting alternative assessment formats, OLS continues to help me navigate my journey at Ashoka.”

Sanjana Jijo

Undergraduate 2024





ASHOKA. LSE. EY

Kalyani could not comprehend why she struggled through certain subjects in school. What took her peers half an hour to read, took her over two hours. OLS diagnosed her with a Specific Learning Difficulty with language and mathematics. After graduating from Ashoka, Kalyani completed her Masters in Gender Studies and Policy at the London School of Economics.

“When I learned about my learning difficulty, I felt a mountain lifted off my shoulders. For the longest time, I was convinced I was not trying ‘hard enough’. That day, for the first time, I told myself, ‘It is not your fault.’

Kalyani Shukla

Undergraduate 2019

Senior Project Consultant at EY

KEY INITIATIVES

Inclusive University Alliance

The OLS co-founded the Inclusive University Alliance along with leading higher education institutions and organisations in India. The idea is to enhance the quality of Inclusive education. Members include IIT Kanpur, IIT Madras, IIT Roorkee, IIM Bangalore, IIIT Bangalore, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, I-Stem, and Vision Empower.

Peer Learning Support Programme (PLSP)

PLSP is an interactive platform based on a mentor-mentee framework. Senior year students provide one-on-one guidance to juniors facing difficulties in navigating their academic journey. To date, 100 mentors have guided over 300 mentees.

Ashoka website accessibility

The OLS led the web accessibility project for the new Ashoka website. It resulted in the integration of features that ensure accessibility to those with auditory, cognitive, neurological, physical, speech, and visual disabilities. It also prepared a detailed step-by-step guide on how various departments and offices at the University can make their respective webpage content accessible.

Assistive Technology Room (ATR)

The ATR was established to equip students with educational and library resources in accessible formats. A rare facility in Indian educational institutions, it offers state-of-the-art technology supporting visual and hearing impairment, locomotor disability, SLDs, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and others. It specifically enables them to pursue previously inaccessible fields of mathematics and sciences.



EVENTS AND AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

OLS has initiated a host of awareness and advocacy campaigns on important issues in order to further include and normalise differences on campus and beyond.



Newsletter: Neurodiversity Initiative

OLS' newsletter, *Neurodiversity Initiative*, raises awareness about neurodiversity and diverse learning conditions among Ashokans.

Orientation: Inclusive Education at Play

As a part of orientation week, OLS sensitises students from the incoming undergraduate batch. It emphasises diversity in race, class, gender, disabilities, and other markers of social identities.

Connecting with Differences: A session with Ashoka staff

The session aimed to help staff understand the diversity around them and build an inclusive and nurturing work environment.

International Day for Persons with Disability

Contributes to the ongoing dialogue on inclusion of disabilities in higher education, and how inclusive practices can be implemented in our daily lives on campus.

A CULTURE OF ALLYSHIP

Over the years, the Ashoka community has come together to learn from and along with students with varied abilities. The awareness and sensitisation campaigns have built a culture of allyship which empowers students to take meaningful action. They are investing time and effort to help their peers steer through campus life.



Ayush (extreme left)

Ayush is visually impaired. He is majoring in economics and finance.

“Ashoka is one of the few places where I’m treated equally and my disability is not the first thing that people see. I am glad I am a student here.”

Ayush Prakash

Undergraduate 2024

Utsavi helps a student with visual impairment navigate her classes, mess, and various other places on campus.

“I never realised how navigation might be a major concern for someone because we do it so unconsciously. It has been a rewarding experience which has evolved into a cherished friendship.”

Utsavi Prakash

Undergraduate 2024

LEADING THE CONVERSATION ON DYSLEXIA AND INCLUSION

Over the course of the last couple of years, OLS has initiated and steered crucial conversations around dyslexia as well as the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education.

Inclusion in Higher Education: Leadership Summit 2022

OLS convened the first pan-India summit on the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. This initiated a deliberation around best practices, and helped spearhead collaborations with like-minded institutions. The conversations delved into discussions on policies, solutions to major systemic and infrastructural barriers, research, and technological advancements.



“It is very exciting for me to join this elite group that talks about inclusion in higher education. Ashoka University has taken a great role in terms of their own Office of Learning Support, which has created a niche area for themselves in this domain.”

Anil Sahasrabudhe

Chairman, All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE)

The Dyslexic Mind: Thinking Differently About Higher Education

OLS organised the first conference on the inclusion of students with dyslexia in higher education institutions (HEIs) in India. Held virtually, it aimed to highlight dyslexia and consider its future in the realm of employment. The idea was to encourage employers to hire people with dyslexia in order to achieve greater organisational productivity.



“I want to congratulate OLS for the exceptional conference I was fortunate both to speak at and to attend. I was impressed with how much Ashoka was doing on behalf of dyslexic students. We have a great deal of experience at Yale and I am happy to share what we’ve learned with you.”

Sally E. Shaywitz

The Audrey G. Ratner Professor in Learning Development
Co-Director, Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity

ADVOCATING INCLUSIVE HIRING

People with disabilities (PwD) often find it challenging to access job placements of their choice, if at all. According to market intelligence firm, Unearthinsight, India has nearly 30 million PwD. Of this, while 13 million are employable, only 3.4 million have actually been employed.

Tackling the barriers students face and dismantling the inequalities of access is a cause Ashoka is committed towards. OLS, along with the Career Development Office, is holding conversations with recruiters to hire students with disabilities.

The University currently has 15 students with physical disabilities. Nine will be graduating in 2023.

“Our diversity and inclusion agenda at Kotak covers our goals to achieve gender diversity across business groups and grades of seniority as well as to continue to identify suitable opportunities which we can provide to differently abled candidates. We have been actively engaging with Ashoka University to create such opportunities in addition to the ongoing engagement with regard to placements.”

Chetan Savla

President

Kotak Mahindra Bank

LARGER IMPACT

It is important that inclusive practices are not restricted to a small section of HEIs but are spread across universities. The OLS has worked on developing awareness among universities on understanding neurodivergence amongst students as well as capability development within each institution.

“The Office of Learning Support has catalysed the formation of similar offices. We too, established the Office of Inclusive Education at IIT Madras. As a member of the Inclusive University Alliance, OLS has also enabled partnerships with other HEIs, and we all benefit from our collective experiences and best practices.”

Anil Prabhakar

Professor, Department of Electrical Engineering
IIT Madras

“Ashoka University has successfully enabled students with disabilities to pursue their higher education. The service that you are rendering is groundbreaking and needs to be emulated by other institutions. Kirori Mal would be particularly interested in collaborating with the OLS to promote the cause of inclusive education, especially in STEM subjects.”

Professor Someshwar

Department of English
Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi

“As somebody with an SLD, I am acutely aware of both - the struggles and the support system - critical to the success of such persons. The support has increased manifold, but has a long way to travel. In this regard, the work by the OLS is pathbreaking and inspirational for other institutes of higher learning. They have worked painstakingly to carve a niche for Ashoka University - unparalleled anywhere in India.”

Virat Bhatia

Managing Director
Apple India

“As a kid I was not diagnosed with dyslexia as there was very little awareness. But I knew things didn't work for me the way they worked for others. I was fortunate to have support from my parents and teachers. Ashoka is playing a pivotal role in normalising dyslexia and bringing out the uniqueness of dyslexic strengths. By providing support to both parents and students, it is making students feel more confident of their future.”

Shilpa Rao

Head AI Products & Platform
Tata Consultancy Services

THE WAY FORWARD



Increase the number of students with disabilities

Currently, Ashoka admits 1 per cent of students with disabilities every year. We aspire to gradually increase the intake of students benchmarking against global universities



Increase reach of College Readiness Programme

Expand the geographical reach of the CRP to other parts of the country



Diversity in our academic programmes and campus activities

- ▶ Invite applications from students with disabilities for PG programmes. Currently we only receive applications for the UG programme
- ▶ Increase representation in student life clubs and societies, sports, etc.



Advancing the support system and services

- ▶ Ensure maximum accessibility across the Ashoka campuses – existing as well as upcoming (barrier free workplace). Including tactile paths, smartphone-based navigation on campus, modified transport vehicles etc.
- ▶ Investment in sciences content to enhance accessibility



Collaborations with peer universities and resource centres

- ▶ Constitute an association of like-minded institutions in Delhi and Haryana that aim to put inclusion at the forefront
- ▶ Develop active partnerships with resource centres in India and abroad which will be critical to our learning curve



Encourage diverse hiring

- ▶ Reach out to employers in the corporate sector to encourage neurodiversity and disability-friendly hiring. OLS is already creating training modules for corporates who hire from Ashoka
- ▶ Increase such hiring within Ashoka

CONTACT THE OLS



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