Envisioning the Future of Disability Inclusion in India

Event Series

In Diverse Company

WinVinaya Foundation
*Enabling an Inclusive Society*

About

In August 2024, In Diverse Company, in collaboration with WinVinaya Foundation, hosted a groundbreaking three-part webinar series titled "Envisioning the Future of Disability Inclusion in India." This comprehensive event brought together industry experts and educators to discuss disability inclusion in India, focusing on three crucial areas:

1. A Deep Dive into Inclusive Education
2. Building Inclusive Workplaces
3. The Impact of Inclusive Policies and Allyship

The discussions explored how far we've come with disability inclusion, the business case for it, the responsibility of allies, educationists, organisations, and society in this agenda, and strategies for fostering a disability-inclusive world.

These sessions provided insightful conversations and a fantastic networking opportunity, creating a community for those working on the disability inclusion journey.

We present to you a summary of the key insights and takeaways from the event series.
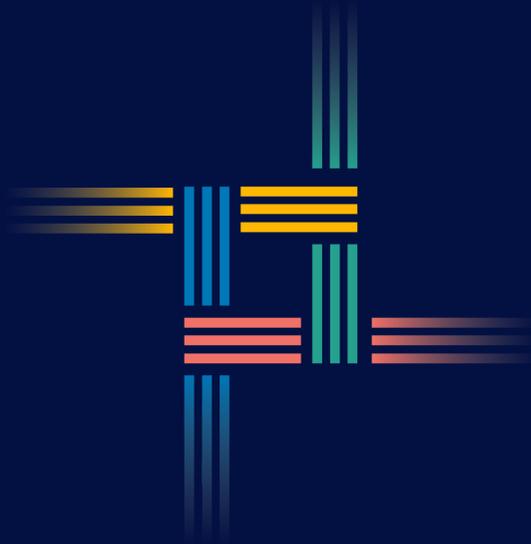
Session 1: A Deep Dive into Inclusive Education

About

Inclusive education remains a significant challenge in India, with many barriers still existing for students with disabilities. The introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has brought potential changes to the landscape of inclusive education in the country.

In the first session of the event series, industry experts, educators, and advocates explored:

- The potential impact of NEP 2020 on inclusive education
- Challenges in implementation and necessary collaborations
- The role of assistive technology in inclusive education
- Visions for inclusive education in India by 2050

Speakers:

Priya Rajkumar - *Head of Education* - Maithree Foundation
Ashwin Ganesan - *Deaf Trainep* - WinVinaya Foundation
Aman Sharma - *Co-Founder* - TEACH
Santhi Karamcheti - *Co-Founder* - Eka Educational and Charitable Trust
Akila Sankar - *Co-founder* - WinVinaya Foundation
Neha Trivedi - *Founder* - Spandan

✓ **"The NGOs, companies, schools, when they all collaborate, I think it would benefit the community better because it would help candidates learn more about what they need to learn to be able to get better jobs. And it would also help to break barriers and help the deaf community improve so that we can be proud of ourselves."**

Ashwin Ganesan - Deaf Trainer, WinVinaya Foundation

Key Insights

1. Inclusive education means creating equitable access and opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities. It goes beyond simply basic physical integration. It involves creating environments where all students can learn, grow, and participate fully. This includes adapting curricula, teaching methods, and assessment practices to meet a diverse set of needs.

2. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 brings both hope and challenges for inclusive education. While the policy mandates inclusive practices and emphasises flexibility, implementation remains a significant challenge. Key areas of focus include early intervention, flexible curricula, teacher training, and support services. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan comes with its challenges of maintaining high marks, which is a challenge for the students, thus enrolling in a hybrid set-up. The afternoon schools provide sensory integration and extra support, as the mainstream schools are not yet prepared.

3. Collaboration across stakeholders is crucial for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Collaboration between educational institutions, NGOs, companies, and government agencies is necessary. This includes joint efforts in intersectional collaboration of teacher training, curriculum development, and creating pathways from education to employment.

4. Assistive technology plays a vital role in enabling inclusive education. From AI-powered translation tools for sign language to note-taking apps and voice-to-text software, technology is opening new possibilities for inclusion. It can even improve their lifestyle by assisting them in day-to-day activities.

Key Takeaways

- Inclusive education requires a mindset shift, not just policy changes. While policies like NEP 2020 are important, true inclusion requires a change in societal attitudes and beliefs. This involves challenging biases, promoting empathy, and fostering a culture of acceptance from an early age.

"We have talked about inclusion; it is a mindset. It can never be a policy. It is the policy is the second thing, until and unless we do not make ourselves inclusive." – Aman Sharma - Co-founder, TEACH

- Teacher training and support are crucial for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Comprehensive teacher training programs that cover a wide range of disabilities are needed for cross-disability education. Ongoing support and resources for teachers are equally important.

- Early intervention and continuous support throughout the educational journey are essential. Early identification and intervention are important for children with disabilities, as well as ongoing support through school, higher education, and the transition to employment.

- The role of technology in inclusive education should be carefully considered and balanced. While assistive technology offers many benefits, it should complement, not replace, human-centred teaching approaches. Ensuring equitable access to technology is also crucial. It can help people communicate better and improve their skills to get a job.

- Inclusion benefits everyone, not just students with disabilities. Creating truly inclusive educational environments fosters empathy, adaptability, and collaboration skills in all students, preparing them for a diverse and inclusive society.

"It should be a level playing field for everyone- person with or without disability." – Akila Sankar - Co-founder, WinVinaya Foundation

The focus should be on cultivating different teaching methods for individual needs—storytelling, drawing, or any other visual or auditory-based method.

- The vision for inclusive education in 2050 is ambitious but achievable with sustained effort and collaboration.

Session 2: Building Inclusive Workplaces

About

Disability inclusion in India's workplace remains a significant challenge. While progress has been made, people with disabilities still face barriers to education, employment, and social inclusion. According to the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016, only 21 specific conditions are recognised as disabilities in India, and these, too, are counted as disabilities only when they are severe.

In the second session of the event series, industry leaders, including those with lived experience of a disability, explored:

- The spectrum of disabilities, including visible and invisible disabilities
- Reasonable accommodations and the role of technology
- The role of Indian organisations in fostering disability inclusion
- Challenges organisations face in promoting disability inclusion and strategies for creating more inclusive environments

Speakers:

Chhavi Anand - *Vice President & Zonal Head HR -* Tata AIG
Shohan Konchada - *Software Engineer*
Vivek Misra - *Director -* Microsoft
Panchali Banerjee - *Co-Founder and Director -* ORCHVATE
Jai Thade - *Head of Content -* In Diverse Company

Key Insights

1. Economic Factors: Accessible technology can help level the playing field for people with disabilities across every area of life. It is important to make technology affordable in the country to cater to people with invisible disabilities like neurodivergence.

2. Disability is a spectrum: It can affect anyone at any point in their lives. People with disabilities face barriers in many forms—communication, physical, attitudinal, social, and more. Thus, because of the complexity of its barriers, disability is a spectrum. Prevailing biases ensure that all people with disabilities do not get the same treatment.

3. Societal factors: There are often misconceptions about what people with disabilities can and cannot do, leading to discrimination in education, employment, and social settings. It is important to identify this gap and not make biased decisions.

"Inclusion is not a rocket science, it's a matter of common sense. If every individual takes that effort to make the best use of common sense, there is no need of organisations like us."

Santhi Karamcheti - Co-Founder,
Eka Educational and Charitable Trust

Key Takeaways

- The right intent: Organisations must focus on creating genuinely inclusive cultures that go beyond legal compliance and hiring quotas. Merely meeting legal requirements or filling quotas is not enough to create true inclusion. Organisations need to foster a culture where disability inclusion starts before hiring and goes a long way after that.

- Universal design: Universal design principles should be implemented to create inclusive environments by default. This means that nobody needs to ask for any specific accommodations as they are built in the process. A diverse team of designers can do this to think of what an inclusive environment for everybody could be, minimising the feeling of exclusion or marginalisation. In the workplace, this could involve ensuring that all digital tools are compatible with screen readers, providing adjustable desks and ergonomic equipment, or designing meeting spaces that are accessible to wheelchair users.

- Active allyship: It is essential to educate employees about several types of disabilities and appropriate behaviour. Allies can help bridge the gap between employees with disabilities and those without, fostering a more inclusive and understanding workplace. A change in perspective, along with curiosity, allows you to understand the lived experience of another and be an active ally.

- Designing of Roles: Roles can be created based on the strengths of people with disabilities rather than accommodating them for the existing jobs.

"Based on our first-hand experience, we can see that organisations are beginning to realise the financial benefits of contracting out image and video annotation work to skilled and trained neurodivergent teams."
– Panchali Banerjee - Co-founder & Director, Orchvate

The Business Case

The companies that do not include people with disabilities are not only doing something ethically wrong but also missing a huge market segment.

According to a study by Accenture and the American Association for People with Disabilities, 45 companies stood out for leadership in areas specific to disability employment and, on average, had 28% higher revenue and double the net income compared to their peers.

A study by the Indian Labour Organisation concluded that Employer Reputation goes up by 5.3% and diminishes by 15.8% depending on whether or not an organisation has involved people with disabilities.

Moreover, the workforce is comprised of 75% millennials who would want to join organisations that are truly inclusive. Gen Z values inclusion even more when it comes to the LGBTQIA+ community. Therefore, for future employees to join, a company must broaden its horizons.

In conclusion, we should focus on including diversity and inclusion in the micro-elements that make up our work culture. Focusing on bigger policies is equally important, but considering micro aspects of disability will enable us to make that shift.

> **"It is not a good thing to do, but it is a business imperative. It is essential that we focus on people with disabilities."**
>
> Vivek Misra - Director, Microsoft

Session 3: The Impact of Inclusive Policies and Allyship

About

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWDA) of 2016 marked a significant shift in India's approach to disability rights. However, implementation remains a challenge.

In the third session of the event series, industry experts, policy makers, and advocates explored:

- Comparison of The RPWDA 2016 with the PWDA 1995
- The concept of Reasonable Accommodation and Universal Design
- The limitations & challenges of government policies

Speakers:

Bhumika Modh - *Manager Policy Research and Co-ordination* - APD

Arun Kumar S - *Team Lead, Accessibility Tester* - WinVinaya Infosystems

Girish Kulkarni - *Head – Apprenticeship & RPL* - NASSCOM Future Skills

Leenika Khattar - *Director of Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging* - NASSCOM

Damini Ghosh - *Senior Resident Fellow and Team Lead* - Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

Shiva Jayagopal - *Co-founder* - WinVinaya Foundation

"Once it is in the law, at least the complying companies will start strategising and including it in their strategic plans, annual firing strategic plans. There is a beginning, a positive beginning."

Girish Kulkarni - Head Apprenticeship & RPL, NASSCOM Future Skills

Key Insights

1. Shift from Medical to Social Model of Disability: The RPWDA 2016 represents a transition from viewing disability as a medical condition to recognising it as a social issue. This shift emphasises societal barriers rather than individual impairments. Its purpose is to achieve inclusion for persons with disabilities by respecting their differences and making them an active part of society. The major difference would be that PWDA 1995 focused more on setting up special schools for children with disabilities. In contrast, the RPWDA 2016 is based on the idea that children with and without disabilities will learn together. Policies and practices should focus on empowerment rather than charity.

2. Importance of Terminology: Using person-first language (e.g., "person with a disability" rather than "differently abled") is crucial for respecting the identity and focusing on the person rather than their disability. The term 'divyaang' is also no longer acceptable as it refers to people having some divine powers, which dehumanises them.

3. Challenges in Implementation: The cross-sectoral nature of disability issues requires coordination across various government levels and ministries, creating challenges in policy implementation. For any government or ministry to ensure that somebody's rights are achieved, they must respect, protect, fulfil, and facilitate.

4. Employment and Apprenticeship Opportunities: Equal opportunities in mainstream employment are needed, and suggestions have been made to amend the Apprenticeship Act to include a minimum percentage for persons with disabilities. If the minimum requirement could be included in the act, then it is more likely to be implemented successfully. Even after becoming an act, compliance with it will be an issue.

Key Takeaways

- **Holistic Understanding of Inclusion:** Inclusion is a comprehensive concept that goes beyond mere presence to ensure full participation, respect, and dignity for all individuals.

  Inclusion efforts should address multiple aspects: physical accessibility, policy frameworks, and societal perceptions. Organisations need to assess their culture and practices to ensure they promote genuine inclusion at all levels. Inclusion initiatives should consider intersectionality, recognising that disability often intersects with other aspects of identity.

- **Recent Legal Frameworks:** Recently, the Ministry of Women and Child Development launched the Divyang protocol, which talks about dedicating training Anganwadi workers to improve the early identification of children with disabilities.

  Considering the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, it still requires the consent of the legal guardians for persons with disabilities when processing their personal data. This procedure effectively undermines a person with a disability's legal capacity. These inconsistencies in the frameworks should be addressed, where their rights are protected, and they are treated as independent individuals.

- **Reasonable Accommodation vs. Universal Design:** The debate between reasonable accommodation and universal design highlights the evolving understanding of accessibility. Reasonable Accommodation means making certain changes in the surroundings to be adaptable for a person with a disability.

  Organisations should aim for universal design in their products, services, and workplaces. Reasonable accommodation should be seen as a secondary thing to do, not the primary approach. There is a need for greater awareness about the benefits of universal design for all users, not just persons with disabilities. Universal accessibility should ideally be the target, where organisations should be able to accommodate people with disabilities for everything.

Conclusion

The "Envisioning the Future of Disability Inclusion in India" event series provided a comprehensive exploration of the challenges, opportunities, and potential strategies for advancing disability inclusion across various sectors of Indian society.

The webinar on inclusive education highlights that inclusion benefits everyone, not just students with disabilities. Therefore, accommodating from the beginning is the solution. The panel also concluded that the NEP is hopeful, but there is still a long way to go for disability inclusion in Indian education.

The webinar on building inclusive workplaces concluded that we should focus on including diversity and inclusion in the micro-elements that make up our work culture. Focusing on bigger policies is equally important, but considering micro aspects of disability will enable us to make that shift.

The webinar on inclusive policies and allyship for persons with disabilities highlighted the complex and multifaceted nature of disability inclusion in India. It emphasised the need for an integrated approach that combines legal reforms, attitudinal changes, technological advancements, and ongoing commitment from all sectors of society. Moving forward, it is crucial to recognise that inclusion is an ongoing process that requires consistent effort, adaptation, and genuine engagement with people with disabilities.

This event series highlights the need for an integrated approach that combines legal reforms, attitudinal changes, technological advancements, and ongoing commitment from all sectors of society. It also emphasises that inclusion is an ongoing process which requires continuous learning, adaptation, and commitment from all members of society.

Thank you!

Want to get in touch with us for future events, contribute to our thought leadership, or have a chat about ED&I? Send us an email at info@indiversecompany.com.

This event was conducted in partnership with WinVinaya Foundations.

✓ **"Inclusion will not happen overnight. It will always be work in progress. Legal and policy mandates may not be enough unless accompanied by a culture of empathy and empowerment".**

Damini Ghosh - Senior Resident Fellow & Team Lead, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

Watch the video recording from the sessions on our YouTube channel

In Diverse Company

August 2024

www.indiversecompany.com