

# **Review of Communication Departments' Implementation Reports to the Council of Higher Education**

by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Donsbach

Technische Universität Dresden/Member of the Evaluation Committee

## **General Remarks**

The Council for Higher Education has asked me to review and assess the implementation reports submitted by the heads of departments of the following six institutions in the field of communication (in alphabetical order): Ben-Gurion University, College of Management, Haifa University, Netanya Academic College, Sapir Academic College, and Tel-Aviv University. The author was a member of CHE's Committee for the Evaluation of Communication Studies (further on: "Committee"), chaired by Prof. Joseph T. Cappella (University of Pennsylvania) and had his share in the seven reports (six institutions plus overall situation of communication studies in Israel). I therefore feels equipped to review the implementation reports based on the Committee's recommendations.

My starting point will always be the short-term as well as middle- and long-term recommendations and I will check if and how these have been addressed in the reports. However, I will, where appropriate, also take parts from our main texts into consideration because they conveyed additional evidence and rationale to the institutions that might have been used as guidelines in the implementation process.

A final remark: I am not a native speaker in the English language. I apologize beforehand for any mistakes and or ambiguities in expression that, I hope, will not affect the reception of my judgments.

## **PART I: IMPLEMENTATION REPORTS**

### **HAIFA UNIVERSITY**

The Committee's recommendations centered basically around two (interrelated) issues: The high drop-out rate and the overwhelming priority of research and theory in the courses to the exclusion of teaching communication practice. All recommendations concern one of these issues. The Department shows a high degree of responsiveness to the Committee's assessments and suggestions.

- As a short-term recommendation the Committee suggested to address immediately the high drop-out rates in both the B.A. and (even more so) the M.A. program. The department should renew its commitments to understand and remediate the drop-out rates for both programs.
  - In the B.A. program the Department Head and other faculty members held regular meetings with BA students at the beginning and end of each academic year to gather, as the Committee had recommended, evidence on reasons for dropping out of the program. The Department now keeps a systematic record of the students who are dropping out and tries to gather evidence for the reasons for their dropping-out. Further, a M.A. student was appointed as the equivalent of an 'ombudsman' to handle specific individual problems of BA students. The Department also follows the Committee's assessment that some portion of the drop-out rate might be caused by insufficient offerings in practical teaching (see below).
  - The systematic statistics and analyses of drop-out cases also apply to the M.A. program. The Department has appointed faculty members to work with Master students who are having difficulties in writing their thesis. Further, a workshop for thesis writing was established. The most serious change to address drop-out rate on the M.A. level is the introduction of three non-thesis M.A. programs: "Spokesmanship and PR", "Media Studies", and "Education and Communication". Students who find difficulties in the process of writing thesis can shift to one of these non-research programs.
  - Thus, the Department embraced four out of the five suggestions that the Committee had given: Gathering evidence about drop outs, establish liaison with students on a continuing

and institutionalized basis about their needs and expectations, increase the mentoring of M.A. students, and institute writing workshops to assist in completion of the thesis. It did not restructure the M.A. curriculum per se in order to insure thesis completion within a two year period but it added a course ("Thesis Writing Workshop") and offered non-thesis programs.

- On the second issue the Committee held that the Department can retain its commitment to theory and research while using practice to enhance the subtle appreciation of theory. The Committee particularly expected that the faculty shows a willingness to address the role of practice in its under-graduate curriculum. The short-term recommendations concerned the following three points:
  - The Committee suggested that the Department solicit university support for a faculty member who can bridge practice and theory/research in the curriculum. At the time of drafting its implementation report the Department was about to issue an announcement of an open full-time position for a faculty member to be responsible for practical workshops and mediate between our theoretical and practical courses (who might by now have been hired).
  - The Committee further suggested soliciting support for the re-opening of the television studio and development of laboratory environments for more realistic and high-quality hands-on study of journalistic writing, editing and design; advertising and public relations practice. The Department bought equipment for an online radio studio and three digital video cameras and received new rooms for their technology and the respective courses. In addition the Department negotiated with media organizations to run workshops for practical instruction. Finally, the Department has broadened its practicum program. Again, all points were addressed as recommended by the Committee.
- The middle- and long-term recommendations also focused mainly on the high drop-out rate particularly in the M.A. program. The suggestions to consider granting course credit for thesis work or thesis proposal preparation and to structure the second year to insure motivation to complete the thesis go more or less uncommented by the Department Head's report. However, as mentioned above, the Department now offers three additional Master programs without thesis which addresses this point indirectly. I recommend that faculty

still thinks about further alterations to the existing Master *with* thesis in order not to lose those students with higher academic ambitions.

- A final point raised by the Committee concerned interdisciplinary research with other units at Haifa University. As the Head of Department indicates links have been established with units inside and outside HU. He also points to existing teaching cooperation with other schools. Information on both topics is rather vague and no evidence given on concrete research project proposals with other disciplines.

Except for this latter point, the implementation report by the Department of Communication at Haifa University shows a high degree of responsiveness to the Committee's suggestions. The Department has worked hard to address the two main issues that need their attention, i.e. drop-out rates and students' practical training.

## **PART II: GENERAL OBSERVATIONS**

The Council for Higher Education has asked the reviewer for his observations of general effects of the whole QA process, i.e. were there any changes and progress in the field of communication studies in Israel since the QA's committee's report as apparent from the institutions implementations reports. As the individual schools'/departments' situations and problems have been rather different and, consequently, their reports covered many different dimensions there are not many common fields that can be addressed.

### *Economy of teaching*

In its "General Observations about Higher Education in Communication Studies in Israel" the Committee had summarized its impressions in five points of strengths and seven points that represent challenges. Most of these were of a long-term concern and/or could not be addressed by individual organizations because they are part of the larger structure of academic education in the field of communication in Israel. Our major concern then was what we called the "economics of teaching" including the high number of junior faculty teaching core courses, the high teaching load, and the considerable proportion of overall teaching by adjuncts. So far, we have not seen a considerable increase in more senior faculty except for the two new hires at Ben Gurion University. The department at Tel Aviv University is certainly in a fringe situation jeopardizing the overall potential to

offer a program at a standard as it can be expected from such an acknowledged institution.

### *Quality of teaching*

Several of our recommendations for multiple departments related to the quality of teaching, either by asking for tighter procedures to assess this quality in individual classes, or by recommending to focus on more up-to-date research. I can see from the implementation reports that the departments/schools have accepted this advice and taken appropriate measures. As the quality of teaching is a core dimension of the function of these institutions of higher education this is certainly one of the prime outcomes of this quality assessment process. The institutions (and maybe CHE) might even go a step further and develop explicit routines for the assessment of teaching quality. The monitoring of syllabi for their compliance with the state-of-the-art in research, and classroom visits for ensuring that modern didactics are employed has been put on the radar screen of many of the institutions without conveying the (wrong) impression that this quality was low.

### *Maintaining identity*

Our reports (and the institutions' responses to it) have led in some cases to a stronger self-awareness of foci and specializations. Ben Gurion University has reacted to this when hiring new faculty, others like College of Management (business focus) or Sapir (visual communication) – although they have rejected recommendations made by the Committee – deliberated on their foci or peculiarities and why they think they should be maintained. These processes of 'self-identification' are important and should be part of an ongoing self-assessment process independent of but often triggered by CHE's activities.

### *Strategic planning*

The Committee had also recommended that each institution develop a strategic plan and try to achieve a balance among the three factors that we think are crucial dimensions of their identity, i.e. emphasis, specialization and geography. Particularly given the rapid growth, change, and further diversification of the field of communication not only in Israel such planning is crucial in order to make informed decisions about the development of the program and the allocation of resources.

It is not necessarily the general function of the implementation reports (there, the institutions respond to concrete recommendations made by an evaluation committee) to reflect such strategic planning on the side of the institutions. I therefore cannot blame the institutions for not much referring to such long-

term objectives. However, it can be a lesson from this experience that strategic planning should play a more important and more explicit role within the framework of this whole quality assessment process. Institutions could be asked to define their current location on several important dimensions, in which direction they would like to develop these, and how they want to achieve this.

#### *Core identity of communication programs*

The evaluation committee had mentioned in its general observation about the state of the communication programs that most of these programs do not combine the training of communication with other fields. We thought and I still think (given the fact of a changing role of professional journalism amidst new communication roles in the digital world) that such a broad-based knowledge not only in the humanities and analytical-critical thinking but also in certain areas of substance will become more and more important. Because such more general recommendations were not part of the individual and concrete suggestions expressed in our reports the institutions did not see a necessity to respond to this. Thoughts about the core identity of communication programs within higher education could become also part of the self-assessment reports (and not only in communications but any other field as well).

#### *Research areas*

In the general observations as well as in some of the individual reports we pointed to the fact that, in their research, some institutions were very much concerned with purely local topics of Israeli communication and media) rather than more general questions pertaining to the field as a whole. Research areas at Netanya College were a case in point. While such more regional topics certainly have their value they will not help to increase the visibility of Israeli communication research on the international stage. Nevertheless, this visibility is – in light of the number of institutions and people involved in communication research in Israel – disproportionately high. It might be a pragmatic division of labor that universities concentrate more on the general theoretical topics while colleges investigate more local issues. While such a division of labor cannot and should not be imposed on the institutions it might be a fair way of evaluating their research output.

#### *Systematic data acquisition and reporting*

From reading the implementation reports and the data included or attached to them I still get the impression that there is room for improvement in reporting quantitative indicators of resources and performance. For instance, the data for admission scores supplied by Sapir College cannot be compared to the

previous ones in the self-assessment report because in the latter the data were mean values and in the former frequencies in specific brackets. The Council of Higher Education might develop and supply more standardized forms of data gathering and reporting by the academic institutions. This will also help to observe long-term changes in the most important dimensions of academic structure and achievement.

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Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Donsbach

