

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

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## **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**

### **SAPIR COLLEGE**

The recommendations by the Committee concerned basically the content and structure of the curriculum, the quality of teaching and some minor points such as involving the alumni in the development and the quality assessment of the program. As could be expected (and as is appropriate) most of the department's response concerns the Committee's suggestions for changes in the curriculum. Here, one of the core suggestions (the role of visual communication) has not been adopted by faculty.

- The first of the short-term recommendations concerned the role of the alumni. The Committee recommended that regular surveys among alumni be conducted in order to proof success of the program and that the alumni data base be used for seeking continuing material and immaterial support of the School, as well as for soliciting adjuncts and internship positions. The School now is doing such annual surveys. It says that it does so "in two formats" but mentions only one (the survey among the current year's alumni). Obviously, some text got lost and I would assume that the second survey concerns alumni of previous years. This is something that CHE should check. The School does not say if it revised the existing questionnaire (as was recommended by the Committee). However, the survey is now "digitized and computerized" and allows comparisons with previous years and for sub-groups. The report does not indicate if and how the department has already profited from this broader data base.
- The Committee saw room for improvement in the School's quality assessment for teaching. It therefore recommended that the School enhance its evaluation policies, particularly for external lecturers and junior faculty by evaluating on a regular basis all course syllabi (and not only those of mandatory courses). Also, the Committee suggested considering regular classroom visits by senior faculty members to classes of junior faculty and adjunct teachers. It is not clear if and how the School has changed its policy. The report mentions that the College has appointed a "Head of Excellence in Teaching" but how this plays out in the individual units (schools) is not clear from the report. Also - with the argument that this is "uncommon" for Israeli institutions of higher education - the School has rejected the suggestion to practice regular classroom visits by senior faculty to classes of junior faculty and adjuncts. Instead, the report points to plans by the above mentioned Head of Excellence in Teaching for voluntary visits in all (?) classrooms including senior faculty. The value

of planned and therefore anticipated classroom visits is certainly limited and will not fulfill the purpose. However, the School now actively monitors the grading system through comparative analyses of grades given. Faculty expects “a learning process” and a standardization of the evaluation of students’ accomplishments.

- The Committee recommended improvements in the internship program by evaluating the internships on a regular basis using a standardized questionnaire and short reports on experiences during the internship. None of these recommendations are mentioned in the implementation report. The School only repeats which internships students can take in the various tracks.
- The last of the short-term recommendations concerned the ratio of permanent faculty to students. The Committee was worried that too many classes are taught by junior faculty members and adjuncts rather than permanent and senior faculty. The Lecturer’s Union has negotiated a higher number of tenure-track positions in the College allowing long-term adjuncts to tenure-track positions. The School now reports 23 faculty members in the tenure track of which 16 are employed full time. However, only 7 of these 16 are exclusively employed for the School of Communication. Three more positions are expected to be added in the next five-year period. Thus, there is some development but the general problem at Sapir College persists. There are still more than 100 adjuncts whose qualifications for teaching and quality of teaching are hard to assess – just for the mere numbers. I understand that these circumstances are not totally (not even predominantly) in the hands of the School. This might be a general point of attention for the academic infrastructure of Israeli colleges.
- As to middle- and long-term recommendations the Committee had recommended that the School might consider abandoning Visual Communication as a mandatory unit. Instead, it was suggested to build some of its content into the mandatory communication core courses and add Visual Communication to the elective units. The Committee thought that the 18 credit points could be used for offering courses in other fields that would broaden either the general education of students and/or their object-related knowledge (e.g. for future journalists). The School has rejected this idea. The arguments are formal and substantive in nature. The (formal) fact that the CHE at some point had approved the existing curriculum (with VC) is, in my view, no argument because the revision of curricula is a standard procedure. The importance of Visual Communication as a research

field and as a background knowledge for almost all communication areas (on which the implementation report spends several paragraphs) is self-evident. However, the Committee never recommended abandoning the *subject* but re-organizing its role in the curriculum and, thus, improving the overall options for students.

- A second recommendation, following from the above one, urged the School to negotiate courses with departments in other schools at Sapir College or even other academic institutions that would add to the substantive knowledge students need to execute their communication skills. The report contains no response to this.
- The Committee also recommended to the School to consider possibilities for more convergence across the professional, particularly the journalism tracks, in order to reflect the ongoing media convergence processes in the practical field. The School has developed a curricular model how to address this point. It introduced a new inter-journalism track program representing a “cluster of studies” dealing with media convergence. Thus, the existing specialized tracks were maintained but students in these tracks are now offered courses on media convergence. Currently there are two such courses, of which only one (the theoretical course “Journalism in the 21st Century - Cross-Media Journalism” is mandatory and the second (“Cross Media Journalism – Workshops”) an elective. While these amendments to the program are one possible option to cover media convergence in the professional tracks it is questionable if they go far enough on this path. First, only one course is mandatory and this one is not on the *practice* of working for different platforms. Second, the Committee’s intention was to consider tracks that teach journalism independent of single media platforms from the beginning.
- Concerning teaching and learning the Committee recommended long-term strategies for broadening the content of the courses in terms of their epistemological and theoretical access to the field of communication in order to reflect standard, established approaches in the field. The Committee felt that several areas of communication were underrepresented or missing at all, among these empirical methods, public opinion, persuasion, news decision theories, audience research, health communication, or media institutions. The evaluation report suggested that such underrepresented areas should be considered when hiring new faculty. Due to the above mentioned new hiring policy at the College the School has created an appointment committee already in 2010. It does not become clear from the report if

this has led indeed to new hires along the lines suggested by the Committee until the end of 2011. The report also does not talk about changes in the courses taught by existing faculty that would have filled the content gaps.

- The report also keeps silent about the concrete research activities of the faculty members. Following the assessment of the teaching content mentioned above, the Committee suggested broader research foci. The implementation report does not contain publication lists or records of research grants. However, it talks about the infrastructure for research which have been improved through the possibility (subject to approval by the College) to have one third of teaching time allocated to research activities. Two of the School's faculty members have successfully done so.
- The final point in the Committee's recommendations stays, again, uncommented. The Committee had recommended that the School develops plans how to integrate the huge number of adjuncts into the School's academic life. The implementation report does not say if, for instance, interest groups focused on research or support groups focused on teaching or other issues have been set up. The issue of the high number of adjuncts is only mentioned in the report where it talks about the possibility for some adjuncts switching to tenure track (see above) – which is only an option for a handful out of the some 130 adjuncts. Thus, the point goes rather unanswered.

Overall, the impression is mixed. The School of Communication at Sapir College has in one aspect with great conviction rejected the Committee's recommendation to re-consider the curriculum (Visual Communication), in another it went a (too) short step in the right direction (media convergence). Other points like the quality assessment of teaching and of internships have received some attention without showing a credo by the School that some more basic changes are needed in order to address its weaker points.

A point that was only indirectly mentioned in the committee report was the formal admission criteria and grades distribution at Sapir Academic College. Data in the self-study had indicated that for both applicants and admitted students the psychometric scores and school grades have increased in the past five years and that, as a consequence, the School is getting an increasingly qualified pool of students and a more qualified student body. We recommended that such data be part of self-evaluation processes in the future. The admission criteria and grade distributions became an issue when CHE discussed the college's accreditation. In its meeting on June 1, 2010,

the CHE plenum decided to extend by two more years Sapir's temporary authorization to award B.A.'s in the field of communication. This decision will be subject to revision after receiving the implementation report from Sapir which itself will be reviewed by an external expert.

The data supplied do not allow for a direct comparison with the data of the previous period covered in the self-assessment report. The college continues to admit automatically applicants with a matriculation average of 95 or more, and/or a 600 score in the psychometric test, the latter not being required for admission. The college had observed that graduates' average grade had gone down while matriculation and/or psychometric scores at the time of admission had gone up. The college had attributed this development to increasing numbers of students and raising the bar for achievements.

The implementation report presents average grade distributions for some of the courses but no trend data. These grade data range between 76 to 90 points. The reviewer lacks benchmarks so that a numeric assessment of these grade distributions has to go uncommented. At face-value, however, these grade averages probably are still data on the high end and need the continuous attention of the teaching committee.

On the side of applications the college has slightly revised its admission policy. Automatic admission is now possible with a matriculation grade of 95 (unchanged) or a Psychometric examination of 650 or higher (raised by 50 points), and 70 in English (unchanged). The regular admission now requires at least an average matriculation grade of 85 (up from 80 to 84) or Psychometric test scores of 530 or higher (up from 500). The matriculation, psychometric, and English language scores of the actual admitted students (presented in the appendix of the implementation report) again do not allow for a comparison with the previous period because they represent frequencies by category rather than mean values (as in the self-assessment report of 2009-2010).

Thus, Sapir College has bootstrapped its admission policy while at the same time adhering to its policy that young people with not so excellent credentials in school should receive a chance to be admitted. In its self-assessment report the college had justified this policy with the specific social-economic and/or educational background of its applicants. Applicants from working-class and new-immigrant families or had faced grievances due to military service or terrorist attacks should be given a chance to study despite the difficulties they might have encountered in school. The college held: "We believe that it is our responsibility and in our power to locate those with potential, to teach them and provide them with effective tools towards

advanced degrees and integration into the media professions.” This claim is convincing to an outside observer but needs to be assessed from inside the Israeli society. Nevertheless, the school has made efforts to enhance the overall quality of its student body and thus met a concern raised by CHE.

## **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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