

January 24th, 2013

**RESPONSE TO THE REPORT SUBMITTED BY THE INTERNATIONAL EVALUATION
COMMITTEE**

The Department of Hebrew Language at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev welcomes the report submitted by the International Evaluation Committee on behalf of the Israeli Council of Higher Education. We appreciate the time and effort invested by the committee members in the evaluation process, the thoroughness of the report and particularly the opportunity given to us in this process for an early self-evaluation process, followed by a fruitful interaction with the committee members during the visit to our department. The informal self-evaluation process launched in preparation for this process has continued, based on our interpretation of the early observations and oral comments made by the committee at the end of the visit. Now, following the arrival of the report, we can summarize the steps we intend to take to improve all that needs to improve.

We take pride in the congratulatory remarks included in the report. The committee has particularly emphasized the international recognition which our faculty enjoy: BGU Department of Hebrew Language “has an extremely high reputation on the international scene as a centre of excellence of research”. Our teaching program was also evaluated as very high. Importantly, the committee has recognized our sense of mission, as an academic centre in the Negev, to promote the research and general standard of Hebrew where it is of most dire need, namely in the large, underprivileged Bedouin sector. The committee commended the “special care offered to students whose first language is not Hebrew, which has proved to be very effective in helping them achieve good learning outcomes”, and the fact that “The department clearly plays a vital role in providing a university education in the Hebrew language for students of Bedouin background”, thus improving the standard of Hebrew teaching in Bedouin schools.

We take seriously the committee’s important recommendations at both the university and departmental levels. Following is our response to these recommendations (in brackets is the number of each point in the committee’s summary).

1. University-level Recommendation

Retaining current structure (4a)

The committee insists that the department retain its current independent status and not be merged with other departments: “Any such merger would affect its uniqueness, its international reputation as a centre of research excellence, and its attractiveness to students drawn to it by its reputation... Outside of Israel there are no departments that have a specific focus on Hebrew Language and Semitic languages, rather these subjects are represented by isolated members of staff who are located within broader units... A merger may also dilute the quality of its teaching (by combining different student clienteles) and research (larger units will be reluctant to invest in very specialized areas).” We agree with and welcome this assessment and trust that our independent status as a department of Hebrew and Semitic languages will not be jeopardized in any way in the upcoming 5-year plan for the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

2. University and Departmental level Recommendations (requiring budgeting)

1.1 Hiring new faculty (1)

The committee rightfully notes the expected shortage of courses in the field of Classical Hebrew in its Semitic context due to the upcoming retirement wave, as well as in the field of Medieval Hebrew, where our one expert has already retired. We therefore welcome the recommendation of the committee, emphasized several times in the report, that every retiring member of our department should be fully replaced. These concerns have been noted at the faculty and university levels and are currently under discussion in the formulation of the 5-year plan for the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. In fact, one recent retirement (2012) and one upcoming one (2013), both in the field of Classical Hebrew and Semitic languages, have already been replaced, the latter by means of a "bridging position". In a very strict process of international hiring call two outstanding young scholars were selected, one from abroad, one Israeli. Both answer the department's programmatic needs (which are numerous), but were selected primarily by criteria of academic excellence. The Medieval Hebrew position is yet to be filled.

1.2 Adjuncts (2-3)

The committee has recognized the fact that our adjuncts are mostly research oriented and are potential candidates for regular faculty positions, but their heavy teaching load in several institutions prevents them from publishing as intensively as they could. The committee recommends that they be given longer term contracts and additional opportunities to undertake research. This is indeed a top priority in our department. We have already promoted two of our three adjuncts, giving them regular faculty positions in the parallel track (*maslul makbil*). This is still far from optimal, as each of them has a half-time position, which means

they teach more hours than we do in a full position in the regular track, but still necessitates part time positions in other institutions. We would like this almost impossible teaching load to be decreased, if only by a course per semester, and thus to conform with the slightly better conditions prevalent at BGU for the parallel track (excluding the new batch to which our two former adjuncts belong).

1.3 Additional introductory courses (6)

The committee notes: “In view of the continued difficulties caused by insufficient, or non-existent, background among the enrolling students in Hebrew grammar, particularly in vocalization (*niqqud*), the department needs to be given a budget to extend the number of teaching hours for introductory lessons in these subjects. Furthermore, students should be allocated credits for completing such courses successfully”. We have already allocated credit points to 8 out of the 12 formerly unaccredited hours (this proposal was in fact pending approval at the faculty level at the time of the committee’s visit and the members supported this move). We feel, however, that giving credits to the remaining four unaccredited hours will necessarily lower the standard we demand, as this means giving up other courses in order to adhere to the 54 hour limit in the double major program. What we would like then, in the three introductory classes, is budgeting for non-accredited tutorials (*tigbur*), which would be obligatory for weaker students and optional for the rest.

1.4 Hebrew expression courses (7)

The committee finds that the department should be involved in the provision of a course in Hebrew expression (*haba’a*) for the general student body in the University and that any additional resources necessary to implement this should be allocated to the department. In past years we did indeed offer such courses which were very well attended and successful, but were discontinued for budgetary reasons. We would welcome the opportunity to reopen these classes, in recognition of the growing need for such skills and knowing that we have the staff best equipped to teach them to students from all disciplines.

1.5 Arabic for Arabic speakers (8)

The committee recommends that a specific course in grammatical and linguistic aspects of Arabic with a focus on comparison with Hebrew and other Semitic languages should be devised for native Arabic speakers and that resources necessary for providing such a course should be allocated to the department (p. 9). Such a course, highly innovative in departments of Hebrew, would clearly contribute both to the research of Hebrew via Arabic and to integrating the potential linguistic skills of our Arabic speaking students in our general linguistic agenda as a department of Hebrew and Semitic languages. We would therefore welcome the opportunity to open such a course.

3. Departmental-level Recommendations

3.1 Name of department (5)

The committee has recommended that the name of the department be changed to reflect the full range of its activities, namely “The Department of Hebrew and Semitic Languages” or “The Department of Hebrew and Semitic Linguistics”. We discussed this issue at length and came to the conclusion that such a change, though most desirable, is premature at present. Our research encompasses both ancient and modern Semitic languages, such as Akkadian, Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Arabic, but we do not have the means to teach any of these at the depth and breadth that would justify this name. We therefore take it as a goal to strive for, and hope to be able to reconsider this issue in several years.

3.2 Collaboration with colleagues in other departments (4b)

The recommendation that the department should develop more collaboration with colleagues in other departments is indeed important and we shall do our best to implement it. There have been several instances of joint research and writing with colleagues at BGU, but clearly not enough. There is also some cooperation with scholars from other universities, both in Hebrew departments and others, and this too, can be increased to our benefit.

3.3 Medieval Hebrew (9)

The committee is of the opinion that the department should continue to provide coverage of medieval Hebrew in the BA courses. We have no intention of decreasing the present coverage, although our recently retired expert in this field has not yet been replaced.

3.4 Research center (10)

The committee recommends establishing a research center as a more stable source of research funding for our projects and for supporting research students. This sounds very beneficial to the department, but we do not yet know how to go about it. We shall start inquiring about the academic and financial aspects.

3.5 Contact with graduates (11)

The recommendation that contacts with alumni of the department should be consolidated is fully accepted. We have already set up a contact list that informs alumni of departmental activities such as the bi-weekly departmental seminar.

4. A Final Remark

In sum, we are proud and pleased with the highly positive evaluation report. We intend to take advantage of the comments to bolster the department by ensuring, primarily, the points we consider top priority: replacement of senior tenure track faculty, certain additional courses, conditions that enable our adjuncts to engage in research. We shall also strive to improve contact with alumni and look into the possibility of establishing a research center. We hope that the committee's recommendations in terms of resources are accepted in order to improve the department's academic performance.

Sincerely,

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