

November 11, 2012

RESPONSE TO THE REPORT SUBMITTED BY THE INTERNATIONAL EVALUATION COMMITTEE

The Department of Geography at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev welcomes the report submitted by the International Evaluation Committee appointed by the Israeli Council of Higher Education. Our faculty members appreciate the time and effort invested by members of the committee in the entire evaluation process and the thoroughness of the report. We particularly appreciate the opportunity given to us in this process for an early self-evaluation process, interaction with committee members during its visit to our department, and the ongoing informal self-evaluation process which we have launched since then based on our interpretation of the early observations and comments made by the committee.

We take pride in the congratulatory remarks included in the report. The committee has particularly emphasized our highly motivated collegial and productive faculty, our response to dynamic disciplinary trends and our ongoing and thoughtful processes of strategic planning and adjustment to change. We wish to sustain these departmental characteristics for the future generation of faculty and students. We also take seriously those issues highlighted in the Recommendations section at both the university and departmental levels. Following is our response to these recommendations.

1. University-level Recommendations

1.1. Hiring new faculty

The committee rightfully notes the expected shortage of courses in the human geography field due to the upcoming retirement wave. We therefore accept the recommendation of the committee that every retiring faculty should be fully replaced, especially in human geography, but in physical geography as well. These concerns, along with additional needs, 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.

We also agree with the recommendation that hiring new faculty members should consider programmatic needs. However, we also insist that this hiring principle should incorporate academic excellence. Certainly these two considerations should be balanced, and in fact they have been during our recent round of hiring. The final decision was based on integrating high international academic standards with programmatic needs, with the first playing a major role. The hiring process was concluded with a decision to hire two new members from among the three dozen academics that submitted their candidacy. The position for one of them was awarded to the department by the University on the basis of our academic performance, and a physical geographer was chosen. The second was regarded as a "bridging position" for an upcoming retirement, with the final decision on a GIS expert with a spatial-human geography orientation. Unfortunately the physical geographer recently removed his candidacy and we will need to reconsider this issue.

1.2. Interdisciplinary work

As shown in our self-evaluation report, interdisciplinary research has been a pivotal value in our department both internally and externally and in both the human and physical geography sub-fields. Our Planning program at the MA level is a manifestation of this interdisciplinary principle. We have also shown a considerable increase of interdisciplinary research in recent years due primarily, but not exclusively, to the excellent younger generation of our faculty members. Indeed, new and rich research directions have been opened at the edges of our discipline for both faculty members and graduate students, entailing also competitive research grants and publications in high quality international journals. We hope to continue these efforts and directions.

1.3. Budget for field trips

We cannot agree more with the recommendation that budget for field trips and extra-classroom experiences for our students should be reinstated. These activities are crucial for teaching capacities and learning outcomes in the geographical discipline. In certain sub-fields they are invaluable. We hope that the faculty will reconsider its policy in this regard, and reinstate the full budget for field trips in accordance to curriculum needs.

1.4. Refocusing PhD programs

We share the recommendation that part of research training at the PhD level should be oriented towards the applied needs of the governmental and private sectors. Faculty members do their best to orient dissertation research towards drawing as much applied wisdom as possible relevant to this goal. We also believe, however, that basic research has advantages too that have to await their recognition in due time by these agencies and businesses similar with basic research in general.

More generally, we agree that PhD students should be given the proper experience in teaching at the undergraduate level as part of their education. Such an effort will enrich our BA teaching program, particularly in human geography which faces an immediate shortage of courses due to the anticipated wave of retirements, enabling redirection of senior teaching resources to the MA and PhD programs.

2. Departmental-level Recommendations

2.1. Restructuring the current curriculum

2.1.1 The BA Program

This is one of the major concerns of the committee's report. As reported in our self-evaluation document we have already begun to restructure our BA curriculum. The first stage of this process was the termination of the four-track system and establishing instead a simpler and student-friendly system of three specialties—Human Geography, Physical Geography and Geographic Information Technologies (GIT), effective the academic year 2012/13.

The second stage of this process refers to the multiplicity of two-credit courses. We have begun considering this issue favorably towards reducing the number of such courses at both the introductory-required and the specialty levels and in both human and physical geography. While some courses were already deleted from the program effective 2012/13 (Topography, Pro-seminar), uniting existing courses of neighboring topics into three and even four-credit courses will be the major method. Possible examples may include: Introduction to Urban Geography-Introduction to Economic Geography; Aerial Photography-Introduction to Remote Sensing-Introduction to Cartography-Image Processing; Fluvial Geomorphology-Slopes; and several more. This will allow not only fewer and deeper courses but

reduced class and exam burden on students, as well as redirection of teaching resources to the MA program. This process, however, will naturally stretch over the span of several years, and will take advantage of the recent and approaching retirement of five faculty members.

Also under consideration is a search for university-wide introductory level courses that fit human and physical geography needs, to which our students can be referred. The search includes courses from social science, natural science and health science departments (examples: introductory mathematics, chemistry, physics, economics, sociology-anthropology, statistics, programming etc.). This has been done in the past with only partial success. The major obstacle here is lack of cooperation by the host departments on the grounds of student ill-qualification or lack of available classroom space. We will work with the university administration to facilitate this option for the benefit of needy departments. In this respect of inter-departmental/school cooperation, we have launched a joint Geography-Management BA program (54cr.pts. each) which will hopefully become attractive to some of our students.

Another issue is related to the recommendation that the introductory GIS course should be offered earlier on the program. We accept this recommendation, and believe that with the other shifts in the program outlined above this will become possible soon. However attention should be given to the fact that some introductory level geographical knowledge is required as a prerequisite for making this course fully effective. Therefore the department will make effort to move this course to the 1st semester of the 2nd year where it is most appropriate. Regarding the advanced spatial analysis courses, as noted above the department has hired a new faculty member in this field who will teach at least two advanced courses in spatial analysis, one of them specifically on GIS and spatial analysis of the human environment.

2.1.2 The MA program

The MA program has also begun to undergo a restructuring process recently, along the lines recommended by the committee. First, the number of BA students that are allowed to take MA courses will not surpass 50% in any course and the number of such courses will be restricted. Second, in accordance with university common program frameworks, we have reduced the number of course credits in the

thesis-track to a total of 36, including the thesis (12crd., except the Planning program, see below). This reduces the shortage of courses in the program, an issue which the committee highlighted in its report. However, in an effort to enrich the program, a search for university-wide appropriate courses should begin in similarity with that of the BA program. Some faculty members rely on personal connections to facilitate entry of our students into these courses but this too needs to be better coordinated on a university level. This will also meet the recommendation of increasing inter-disciplinarily of research and teaching in our department.

Third, we have launched the revised Urban and Regional Planning program (42 cr.pts, thesis weighs 12 pts) as part of the MA program. Following an intensive preparation process that included hiring external part-time non-tenure faculty, cooperation with BGU Blaustein Institute for Desert Research, and a very successful campaign, the academic year of 2012/13 opened with 27 new graduate students (a record number) of which 14 are in the Planning program. Altogether there are now 20 students in the thesis track in the department. Some courses offered in the Planning program will be open to other students, further enriching course offering in the MA program in general.

With respect to the orientation of the Planning program, and by implication also orientation of research in the department, we would like to refer to the committee's recommendation to strengthen the program and give it a more professional direction. The committee also asked us to consider focusing on a niche area such as desert cities, sustainability, environmental planning, or tourism and regional development. Our response is in two parts. First, these fields are already part and parcel of our teaching and research efforts alongside others that are pursued by our faculty. We believe that diversity of sub-fields within a department is an advantage rather than a disadvantage, as it provides a platform for the development of internal and external interdisciplinary cooperation in teaching and research, a value the committee itself highlighted in its recommendations.

Second, and more importantly, we feel that such a focus will not assist a department of geography located in a university in a peripheral area. Academic as well as regional development under such circumstances can be benefited greatly by developing the interface between the universal and the local rather than highlighting

the niche areas. We believe there should be no distinction between other sciences and geography in universalization of the local and the localization of the universal. We feel the best way is to develop the areas highlighted by the committee, alongside more universal areas of urban and regional planning, in which our department has excelled over the years.

2.2. Teaching assistantships

We accept the committee's observation that the quality of teaching assistantship by PhD students is potentially higher than that of MA students, and that PhD students should be preferred also in order to provide them with teaching experience en route to academia. In an ideal situation this recommendation would be adopted completely. However, there are two hindrances. First, a certain proportion of our PhD students are career-changing and their command of introductory geographical materials is somewhat inferior to that of MA students who are mostly freshly trained geographers. Notably, we have had relatively good experiences with our MA students as teaching assistants. Second, and more important, within the contexts of recent developments in Israeli labor relations, the department cannot afford hiring more costly PhD students.

2.3. Tracking graduates

The recommendation that the department should develop and implement a tracking system for students and graduates is fully accepted. This will serve two purposes: first, evaluating career placement and success as a metric for the quality of the instruction program and; second, creating a body of alumni as part of a platform for future development.

2.4. Laboratories and technicians

As noted above the launching of the restructured MA Planning program has entailed a considerable increase in the number of students. We forecast a further increase in the next years until stabilization is reached. We therefore embrace the committee's underlining of the urgent need to upgrade the planning lab in both space computer and other equipment necessary (e.g. software) and preferably also relocate it.

The committee refers also to the sophisticated equipment available in some of the other labs, but notes that faculty productivity is limited by meager technical support. We welcome this observation in anticipation that the university will increase its support of our technical manpower and close the gap in this budgeting between our faculty and the faculty of natural sciences.

2.5. Research committee

We welcome the recommendation that the department establishes a research committee. As of now, we see the major role of this committee as composed of three tasks: (1) Enhancing the "grantsmanship" atmosphere in the department such that as many faculty members as possible secure research grants, preferably from competitive and international sources, to support their research students; (2) advising new and young faculty members in preparing grant proposals, choice of granting foundations and publication strategy; (3) further encouraging intra-departmental and external inter-disciplinary research. The full operational principles of this committee will have to be learned through interactions with other similar committees elsewhere as well as the suggestions from the evaluation committee members themselves. This said, however, as noted above we continue to pursue our long standing policy of freedom of faculty members to decide on the orientation and nature of their individual research.

3. A Final Remark

In overview, we are pleased about the overall positive evaluation report, but wish to take advantage of the comments to bolster the department in senior tenure track faculty and junior PhD level teaching staff, lab technician staff and an appropriate budget for full scale field education of our students. We hope that the committee's recommendations in terms of resources are accepted in order to improve the department's academic performance.

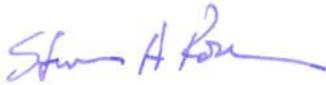
Sincerely,



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