

Adar 6, 5775
February 25, 2015

To:
Ms. Tal Reichman
Coordinator for QA
Quality Assessment Division (QAD)
Council for Higher Education
Jerusalem

**Response to the CHE Evaluation Committee's Report and Recommendations and
Action Plan for the Department of Arabic at Bar-Ilan University**

Dear Ms. Tal Reichman,

Enclosed please find the Response to the CHE Evaluation Committee's Report and Recommendations and the Action Plan for the Arabic Language and Literature Study Programs at Bar-Ilan University. The report arrived at the Department of Arabic (henceforth, "the Department") on August 7, 2014, and was thoroughly studied by the Chair of the Department and the members of the Departmental Steering Committee (henceforth, "DSC"). The response and action plan were written by the Chair of the Department of Arabic, Dr. Livnat Holtzman. The Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and I, the undersigned, approve the following response and action plan.

We wish to express our deepest gratitude to the Committee members for their one-day visit to the Department. The Committee members, who assiduously studied the content of the Self-Evaluation Report that the Department authored, were well-versed in the various aspects of the Department's activities and demonstrated a genuine interest in the Department's staff members and students. The encounter between the Committee, the Department's staff, the students, and the University's administration was conducted by the Chair of the Committee, Prof. David Wasserstein, in a friendly and open atmosphere that enabled a sincere exchange of views and thoughts between all parties concerned.

We share the Committee's view that the Department of Arabic at Bar-Ilan University is "excellent and not lacking any essential quality" (p. 5 in the report). The Department is one of the three strongest departments in the Faculty of Humanities: the Department members are regularly praised by the students for the quality of their teaching, they produce an impressive amount of high-quality research, and they enjoy excellent

working relations with each other. Acknowledging the prominence of the Department, the previous Rector allocated four new positions of senior faculty (three in the rank of “Lecturer” and one in the rank of “Senior Lecturer”) in 2012-2013. These new positions (two in the field of modern literature, one in the field of linguistics, and one in the field of Islamic historiography) stabilized the study program and gave considerable momentum to the Departmental academic activities.

In the beginning of the academic year 2014-2015, after a thorough examination of its future development plans, the Department presented to the Dean of Humanities its pressing need for the allocation of another new senior faculty position (in the rank of “Lecturer”) in the field of modern literature. At the moment, this request is under review by the Rector. Other demands for new senior positions (one in the field of Islamic jurisprudence and one in the field of Classical Arabic) that were presented by the Department in the Self-Evaluation Report and gained the support of the Committee, are actually part of the Department’s long-term plan. As such, it can be expected that they will be formally proposed two or three years from now.

We would like to point out, that although the Department enjoys a stable enrollment rate it constantly seeks ways in order to attract more students. With its energetic staff members, the Department generated several new methods for recruiting new students. For example, the Department initiated the development of a new double-major track for senior citizens with the Department of French Studies. Since the study program of the Department is built exclusively for students who already have gained advanced reading skills in Arabic, in the summer of 2014 the Department inaugurated a five-week course in Arabic for undergraduates at the advanced level. Originally, the Department planned that a five week course for beginners would precede the course in the advanced level; however, the events of the summer of 2014 (“Operation Protective Edge”) forced the cancellation of the course. Convinced that the summer courses would increase next-year’s enrollment, the Department requested funding from the Rector in order to subsidize the tuition payments for the courses. This request is now under review by the Rector.

We concur with the Committee’s call to maintain the existing departments of Arabic in the Israeli academia as independent units that should not be merged with the departments of Middle Eastern Studies. Arabic Studies and Middle Eastern Studies are two distinct areas. Although the research fields of both departments sometimes overlap, the study program in Arabic is fundamentally different than the study program in Middle Eastern Studies. The Department’s curriculum aims at deepening the students’ acquaintance with the various layers of the language (Modern Standard Arabic, Classical Arabic in prose and poetry, Judaeo-Arabic,

colloquial Arabic), the wide range of literary genres written in Arabic, and the manifold of Islamicate cultures, with special emphasis on Judaeo-Arabic culture. The courses in the Department are text-oriented, and the Arabic language is at the heart of each course. This is certainly not the situation in the Department of Middle East Studies, which aims for a wider audience not versed in Arabic. This of course does not overrule the need to deepen and strengthen the academic collaboration between the two departments. This collaboration exists in various levels, starting with the language courses that the Department of Arabic provides for the Department of Middle East Studies.

As a policy, the Department welcomes students of Middle East Studies in our advanced courses and seminars; however most of them find the reading material in Arabic too difficult. In addition, the two departments collaborate informally and on a personal basis in purchasing books and academic journals for the departmental libraries and the open stacks in the Central Library. Over the years The Department has made a number of suggestions for cooperation, like advancing the joint supervision of MA theses and doctoral dissertations by the faculty members of both departments, advancing cross-registration between the two departments, developing joint courses, and initiating new study programs. However, these suggestions never came to fruition. Cooperation between two departments from two different faculties needs the support of the relevant deans and the Rector as well. This is a matter of university policy and should not be regarded as the Department's responsibility.

Another point against merging the two departments is the central place that the Department occupies in the Faculty of Humanities. The Department sees in the Faculty of Humanities its natural habitat and invests considerable efforts in promoting constructive ideas for the benefit of the Faculty of Humanities. The cooperation with the Department of French Studies is one representative example. Another example is the 2014 enrichment courses program at the university level. The Department Chair, together with the chair of the French Culture, designed an enrichment program that utilizes the resources of their own departments, as well as two other departments in the Faculty of Humanities, Translation Studies and Comparative Literature. The Department sees its connections with the sister-departments which are interested in language, literature, and culture as beneficial for its faculty members and students. In the last two years, the Department has been a very active player in the process of reorganization in the Faculty, and in fact it was involved in drafting the concept of the School for Languages and Literatures in the Faculty. The Department is therefore vital for the Faculty's stabilization and prosperity.

We would like to address the Committee's recommendations:

1. The Committee recommends that placement tests should be administered in order to classify the students' level of proficiency in the language. It seems that the Committee did not take into consideration the fact that the Department offers three semestral and two yearly proficiency courses for first and second year undergraduates. Native-speakers are exempt from these courses, and so are a few exceptional students who gained strong command in all skills of Modern Standard Arabic and the Palestinian dialect before pursuing their academic studies. These few exceptional students are interviewed upon admission by the Department Chair, and she determines whether they are entitled for an exemption from the proficiency classes, or not. Most of the students, however, are required to take the proficiency courses in order to improve their language skills. In the current situation, in which the Department's undergraduates are either native speakers or not, it is unclear what will be the contribution of the placement tests, but this issue will be examined in the departmental level.
2. The Committee recommends that more lectures should be offered through the medium of Modern Standard Arabic. In 2013, the Department started an organized process of teaching the Arabic media courses with Arabic as the language of instruction. Several attempts have been made to carry out advanced courses and seminars (for example, "Quran Commentary") in Arabic, at least in part. The Department is currently examining the proper method to apply this recommendation in additional elective courses.
3. The Committee recommends that classes are reduced in size. However, it is university policy, and not any decision by the Department, that demands a minimum enrollment for our classes. Classes that do not meet this minimum (17 for the undergraduate level, 10 for the graduate level) risk cancellation by the university. The problem of overcrowded classes exists mainly in the language courses for non-specialists. The Department presented the option of summer courses as a partial solution to the problem. In 2013-2014, the university financially supported the hiring of a full-time teaching associate (a position which equals 10 yearly hours) for the summer courses. We hope to open the summer courses again in 2015; however, without the financial support of the Rector this relatively cheap solution will not be carried out. The other part of the solution is to allocate a full-time junior position ("Moreh Daled", 4th level instructor). Part of this sixteen-hour position will be dedicated to the language courses for non-specialists. This matter should be examined by the Rector.
4. The Committee recommends the inclusion of tutorials in Modern Standard Arabic beyond year one. The Department offers classes in media Arabic in the elementary, intermediate and advanced levels, for first, second and third year students, but of course it welcomes the inclusion of additional hours in its curriculum. This depends on the allocation of the junior faculty position (see item 3 above), a matter that should be presented to the Rector.

5. The Committee recommends that dialectology be included in the Department's academic program. This recommendation entails the recruitment of a suitable researcher for a full-time senior position. In recent years, we were only able to offer the students one course in colloquial language (in the Palestinian dialect). The teacher of this course is a trained linguist and a native speaker. In 2013-2014 we were able to open another group, thus dividing the course into two levels. Further development of the area of dialectal Arabic by allocating a senior position of a researcher does not stand at the top of the Department's priorities.
6. The same goes for the Committee's recommendation for opening more courses in classical Arabic. This recommendation requires an allocation of one senior position, which does not stand high in the Department's priorities. The Department's pressing needs are: an additional senior position in modern literature, an additional senior position in Judaeo-Arabic, and a junior position ("Moreh Daled", 4th level instructor) for the language proficiency courses directed at non-specialists. This matter should be examined by the Rector.
7. The Committee recommends that the subjects of several courses are coordinated with the Department of Middle East. This is an excellent idea, and the Department embraces this recommendation. However, this issue of policy should be first discussed and examined by the Dean of Humanities and the Dean of Jewish Studies. Since the responsibility for this cannot be placed on the shoulders of the Department, the Department Chair has recently initiated a joint meeting of all parties concerned.
8. As for monitoring the teaching and syllabi of junior faculty: the Department Chair personally checks the syllabi of **all** faculty members, junior and senior, and regularly visits classes. This activity was formalized in 2013-2014, prior to the Committee's visit; however, it has been standard procedure in the Department since its foundation. This involvement of the Department Chair is one of the secrets of the outstanding teaching quality of the Department's faculty members.
9. We must correct an error in the Committee's report: junior faculty members have never been authorized to supervise graduate students. In addition, the whole process of supervising MA theses and doctoral dissertations is voluntary. An applicant can study in the MA with thesis track provided that a faculty member agrees to supervise his/her thesis. As far as the faculty member is concerned, the whole process is dependent on his/her consent. The Department Chair never assigns the supervision of theses and dissertations to faculty members.
10. We agree with the Committee that opening a track in Islamic jurisprudence is advisable. This recommendation entails the recruitment of a suitable scholar for a full-time senior position. At the moment, the suggested track does not stand at the top of the Department's priorities.
11. Another error should be corrected here: since its establishment, more than fifty years ago, the Department conducts a departmental colloquium for graduate students. The colloquium meets four or five times each semester to hear and discuss lectures, almost all of which are given by people who do not teach at Bar-Ilan. The colloquium has one of the best reputations among departmental colloquia in Israel. The wide selection

of lectures attracts students from other departments, and contributes to a university-wide fruitful exchange of ideas between graduate students and faculty.

This is the action plan that the Department presented to the Dean of Humanities:

	Committee Recommendation	Action Item	Responsible	Completion Date
1	Administering placement tests	Forming a departmental committee that will examine the recommendation and present its recommendations to the Department Chair.	Department Chair	10/2015
2	Teaching more lectures through the medium of Modern Standard Arabic.	Forming a departmental committee that will examine the recommendation and present its recommendations to the Department Chair.	Department Chair	10/2016
3a	Classes should be reduced in size.	Summer courses in Arabic (dependant on the financial support of the Rector)	Department Chair	10/2015
3b	Classes should be reduced in size.	The allocation of a full-time junior position for the proficiency classes and language courses.	Rector	10/2016
4	The inclusion of tutorials in Modern Standard Arabic.	See item 3b.		
5	Treating dialectal Arabic as a scholarly subject.	Not applicable.		
6	More courses in Classical Arabic.	Not applicable.		
7	Coordinating teaching subjects with the Department of Middle East Studies	Setting policy and guidelines.	The Dean of Humanities and the Dean of Jewish Studies	10/2016
8	Monitoring syllabi and classes.	This procedure is already valid from 2013-2014.		
9	Junior faculty supervising theses and dissertations.	Error in the Committee's Report.		
10	Developing a track in Islamic jurisprudence	Not applicable.		
11	Establishing a colloquium.	Already exists.		

The Department wishes again to express its gratitude to the Committee. The Department genuinely feels that the self-evaluation process and its peak in the form of the Committee's visit on May 18, 2014, were two formative events in the Department's history. It is no mere exaggeration to say that the impact of the self-evaluation process will last for years to come.

We thank the CHE Committee for the helpful recommendations and hope to continue to improve the quality of the Department of Arabic.

Sincerely,



Prof. Amnon Albeck
Vice Rector
In charge of Quality Evaluation

Cc:
Prof. Miriam Faust, Rector
Prof. Shifra Baruchson, Dean, Faculty of Humanities
Dr. Livnat Holtzman, Chair, Department of Arabic