



Thursday, October 14, 2010

Ms. Michal Neumann
Head of the Quality
Assessment Unit (QAU)
Council for Higher Education (CHE)
Israel

לשכת הרקטור

Office of
the Rector

Dear Ms. Neumann,

The Department of Statistics at the Hebrew University was reviewed by the committee headed by Professor Krieger. We thank the committee for their thorough and comprehensive report. The committee made several recommendations, the most critical of which was a change in the affiliation of the department from the Faculty of Social Science to the faculty of Exact Science. They also recommended that the department will move physically from the Mount-Scopus campus to the Edmund Safra campus (Givaat Ram), This recommendation has important implications not only for the department, but also for the academic structure of the entire Faculty of Social Sciences. Yesterday, the committee for Academic Policy started discussing this issue and its implications. At this point it is clear that further work is needed to analyze both academic and non-academic implications of the proposed change. Therefore, all I can say at this time is that we are discussing the pros and cons of this recommendation seriously.

I am attaching the responses of the department and the Dean of Social Science. Both responses contend with the recommendation to move as well as with the other recommendations.

Let me thank CHE and the committee members for their effort in this evaluation process. The Hebrew University considers it as very beneficial to maintaining its academic excellence.

Professor Yaacov Schul
Vice Rector



Jerusalem, August 31, 2010

Prof. Yaakov Shul
Vice-Rector

Shul shalom,

Re: The Dean's response to the evaluation report by the committee for the Evaluation of Mathematics Study-program in the Einstein Institute of Mathematics.

גד מרומ
פרופסור לכימיה יישומית
דיקן
הפקולטה למדעי הטבע

Gad Marom
Professor of
Applied Chemistry
Dean
Faculty of Sciences

Below is my response to the main comments of the committee as outlined in the opening paragraph and the 8 specific points made in their Summary and Recommendation section (p.7).

In general, the Committee's recommendations relate to 3 subjects, namely, (i) the areas of research (comments 1,5) ; (ii) teaching related issues, particularly at the undergraduate level (comments 2,3,4,6,7) ; (iii) infrastructure (comment 8). It is apparent in the report that the recommendations by and large reflect the dire budget restrictions imposed on the faculty of Mathematics and Sciences.

(i) It is accepted that new appointments should be made inside pure mathematics, preferably of faculty members who can cooperate with existing activities on the campus in applied mathematics and computer science.

In the last 18 months, or so, since the beginning of my term, we have appointed already 4 new faculty members in geometry (Dan Mangoubi), analysis and mathematical physics (Jonathan Breuer), analytic and algebraic geometries (Michael Temkin), Ergodic theory (Michael Hochman).

(ii) According to the new budget model and the projected higher budget allocations for the academic year 2010/11, it is planned to provide for more effective smaller exercise classes. Also, the Faculty's teaching committee has already begun an initiative to increase teaching in English at both under- and graduate levels.

(iii) The Faculty will assign more office space, including substitution of the roof floor of the Manchester Building, in the Ross building after Computer Science and Engineering will have moved to its new building.

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Sincerely,

Gad Marom

July 06, 2010

The committee's report is the masterpiece and can serve as an example on how to do a thorough and professional work. It is remarkable how in such a short period the committee was able both to see how the department functions within the Hebrew University and also to analyze the situation of education and research in statistics throughout Israel. A good word should be reserved for those who selected this committee.

On behalf of my department I feel flattered by the report. It makes me proud when our high standards in research are well acknowledged by a committee composed of persons of such high caliber.

I basically agree with all the comments and suggestions made in the report. Below I just add a few points and ideas (and do not reiterate my agreement with specific points).

The main recommendation of the committee is that we move to the Safra campus. The analysis is so true that one would wonder why such a move did not take place by now. I am certainly in principle supportive of this move. Although none of my colleagues expressed any reservations, it is possible that when a real and actual discussion commenced, a few (but I suspect very few), might be against it as they see statistics as a core social science subject. Also, and as hinted in the report, such a change, as any change, is quite complicated even if there is good will on both campuses. My suggestion is that the university will form a committee that will draft a detailed plan for such a move. Once such a plan is drafted it can be brought up for an approval before our department as well as before the absorbing faculty and the Matmedet. I find this way as better than asking for an a priori agreement on such a move: I find it hard to seek such an approval in our department without knowing the exact details (especially those that correspond to our level of independence after the move). As of now, the differences between the campuses and their severe impact on our small department are far more than the 30 minutes drive that the committee mentions.

The committee explains very well the expected shortage of high quality candidates for academic positions in Israel in the coming years. It rightly foresees a fierce competition between the institutes on these candidates. There is much that the Hebrew University can do in helping us in this competition. Joint appointments is one thing (which is natural given the interdisciplinary profession that statistics is). Another is to secure membership in the research centers, such as the Center of Rationality to suitable candidates.

The committee refers to the current competition that we have on slots within the Social Sciences faculty. Indeed, it will be better if a given number of slots is reserved for us. Then we will be able to rank our candidates and make an offer to the next in line

immediately after a candidate with an offer declines. My understanding is that the dean of Social Sciences is supportive of this procedure.

The committee deals with the issue of services courses that we give outside our department. Its members are rightly afraid of the standards of teaching statistics when done by those whose statistics is not their main profession. A risk which is not mentioned regards the curriculum of these courses. It seems as if in the last years less statistics is being taught due to internal decisions made within some departments. I think there is room for a decision taken outside the departments on what is the minimal knowledge in statistics needed for a degree in, say, social sciences. Indeed, a decision was taken lately by the dean of Social Sciences to form a committee that will recommend him on this issue during the next academic year. My understanding is the coming vice dean, Prof. Vered Vinitzki Sarusi has agreed to deal with this matter upon her return from her sabbatical. There is room for such thoughts in other faculties, such as law, and also in mathematics where seemingly a double major B.Sc. student there can graduate without learning probability or statistics.

The committee refers to the fact that our students lack the desired mathematical skills. I agree. One, even if expensive, solution is that we teach calculus separately. At the moment our students do that in large groups together with Economics students. Next year we will have for the first time an elective course for our B.A. students which is designed to strengthen this weak link.

The committee suggests that we should have joint programs with other departments. We are currently having a few. apparently the most successful is the double major with Economics. My guess is that the reason behind this success is that students in Economics take the basic courses in statistics during their first year. As of this year, we have a new joint program with the Computer Science department (in fact, a track within the Computer Science degree). We look forward to its implementation. Yet, we had to compromise here and commence teaching statistics only in second year. We do hope to have something like that in the future with the mathematics department. Currently, a B.Sc. student in mathematics or Natural Sciences can take only a minor (Hativa) in statistics and this option is very rarely taken.

The committee mentions our relative weakness in operations research and applied probability. This is correct due to having only two members in our department working in this area (I am one of them). The department tried this year to recruit in this area but our two consecutive offers were declined. It is possible, depending, among others, on the level of candidates, that we will try again next year. The department may need also to take a strategic decision whether to recruit in applied probability (and strengthen the field where we are having already effective presence) or to broaden our scope and recruit in operations research at large (where we lost 1.5 members recently (one moving to the Technion, the half moving to our Business School)).

The committee suggests having an honors program. There is nothing like that in Israel and I doubt if it will have an impact: The market will not know how to deal with this degree and hence students will be reluctant to join it.

The committee suggests reinforcing our statistical laboratory, both in terms of recruitment and granting seed money. I in principle support this idea (although here too much needs to be learned and work out prior to taking any actions). Moreover, if asked to prioritized, I would put first the need to fill our ranks with researchers since (as well put by the committee) we lost, and are losing, many of them due to retirements.

The committee suggests a joint program with other universities. This means that some courses will be given jointly with other institutions, while others will be given solely to the home students. This is a great idea and indeed a meeting between head of departments in TAU, HU and HUI was set in order to deal, among others matters, with this issue. I am pro this initiative but here too the devil is in the details. For example, I find it hard to imagine students from Haifa making the trip to Jerusalem (or the other way around). Meeting only in Tel Aviv will disadvantage the other institutions. Another is to use modern communication technology and give the students the option to either show up in class or watch the lecturer on big screen at another campus or even at home via the internet.

Moshe Haviv, Head
Department of Statistics



Wednesday, January 05, 2011

Ms. Michal Neumann
Head, The Quality Assessment Unit
The Council for Higher Education (CHE)
P.O.B 4037, Jerusalem 91040, Israel

לשכת הרקטור

Office of
the Rector

Dear Ms. Neumann,

On behalf of the Hebrew University I would like to thank the members of the Review committee for their report of the Department of Statistics at the Hebrew University. We were very pleased with the committee's highly favorable evaluation of the quality of the research and teaching done in the department, and we appreciate the committee's suggestions for making the department even better. The report was discussed by the Department and the department's chair wrote a detailed response to each of the recommendations the committee made. The Dean of the Faculty of Social Science also provided a written response to the report. After receiving the Chair's and Dean's responses, the report and its recommendations were discussed by the Committee for Academic Planning (CAP), which is chaired by the Rector. CAP members questioned the Chair and the Dean about their responses and discussed the solutions they offered to the concerns of the committee.

The major recommendation the committee made concerns the proposal that the Department of Statistics move to the Faculty of Science in the Edmund J. Safra campus. Such organizational change has serious implications which are currently being evaluated. We shall give the committee's proposal a serious consideration, but an implementation of this proposal can occur only once it becomes clear that the benefits of such a move outweigh its cost.

The committee suggested that the department should have joint programs with other departments. In fact, the department already has such joint programs, the most successful of which is the double-major program with Economics. As of this year, a new joint program with the Computer Science department has been established. It is a track within the Computer Science degree, and therefore, statistics is studied only from the second year. The department is considering establishing a similar program with the mathematics department. Currently, a B.Sc. student in mathematics or Natural Sciences can take only a minor (*hativa*) in statistics and this option is very rarely taken.

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The committee mentions the department's relative weakness in operations research and applied probability. The department tried this year to recruit in this area but two consecutive offers were declined. Future attempts will of course be influenced by the availability of high-quality applicants. The department may also need to take a strategic decision whether to recruit in applied probability (and strengthen the field where it already has an effective presence) or to broaden its scope and recruit in operations research at large. In this area, the department has recently lost one member, who moved to the Technion.

לשכת הרקטור

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the Rector

The committee recommended having an honors program. The recommendation is still debated in the department. We note in brief that the market in Israel does not know how to deal with an undergraduate degree with honors, and hence students may not gain any advantage from working harder during their undergraduate studies.

The committee recommended forming joint programs with other universities. The department endorses the idea and a meeting between chairs of the departments in TAU, HU and HUU was set in order to discuss this issue. We note, however, that joint programs with TAU may create a disadvantage for the Hebrew University because most students, who live in Tel Aviv, will not have an incentive to enroll at the Hebrew University. They might be able to rip the benefits of the strong HUU department without the cost of having to live in Jerusalem.

The committee discussed the importance of service courses given by members of the Statistics department. The Dean of Social Science decided to strengthen the way statistics is taught in the Faculty. The vice dean was appointed to chair a committee which will discuss this issue and suggest ways to improve the teaching. Among other things this committee will consider teaching an advanced undergraduate course of the philosophy of statistics, offered by the Faculty to all students, on top of the regular courses. Importantly, the Dean considers it highly important that these courses be taught by regular staff from the department of Statistics rather than by adjunct lecturers.

Let me end by reiterating our appreciation of the committee's work

Sincerely,

Professor Yaacov Schul
Vice Rector