



THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF ISRAEL

Prof. Judith Gal-Ezer

Vice President for Academic Affairs

January 4, 2011

Members of the Committee for the Evaluation of Biology/Life Sciences Study Programs  
The Council for Higher Education  
Jerusalem

We thank the committee for its comprehensive report and for the constructive and helpful comments regarding the quality of teaching and research in the unique setting of the Open University. We are pleased that the committee acknowledged the strengths of our Life Sciences program and faculty.

Here is a point-by-point response to the committee's comments:

In its **Executive Summary** (3.2) and **Goals and General Situation** (3.3), the committee identifies the vital and unique role of the Open University (OU) in the Israeli academic world. The committee also stated that the faculty, course coordinators and tutors comprise a highly dedicated group.

With regard to the **Curriculum** (3.4), the committee says *Curriculum is well rounded and diversity of courses is adequate* but recommends to *restrict the maximum duration for a B.Sc. degree to 7 years and update courses more frequently*. The issue of limiting the duration for a B.Sc. degree has been discussed by the academic subcommittee for Natural Sciences. The decision was to limit the duration to 10 years (the decision – in Hebrew – is appended to this response).

As to course updating: we are aware of the need to update the learning materials so as to reflect the rapid developments in the life sciences. We overcome this challenge by providing our students with frequently updated learning materials that complement or replace some of the materials in the OU books. In many courses, these are technology-based materials posted on course websites that are updated more easily than the written study units. The advanced courses, as well as some of the intermediate ones, are routinely updated by incorporating review and research papers into the learning materials.

The committee notes that although we *have several ecology courses, including traditional field courses, at the undergraduate level we lack advanced courses in Ecology*. We are now in the process of planning a graduate program in Natural and Environmental Sciences at the OU. This program will include, among others, courses in Ecology and Biodiversity that will also be offered to advanced undergraduate students.

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In **Teaching and Learning** (3.5) and **B.Sc. or M.A. students** (3.6), the committee acknowledges the wide variety of teaching aids that include technology-based materials as well as personal assistance by well-qualified tutors and course coordinators. The committee indicates the strength of OU in providing higher education in the Life Sciences to students who live in the periphery, as well as to students who can dedicate only part of their time to studies. While the program of studies is flexible, and allows students to tailor a program of studies suited to their special needs, the committee indicates the "highly structured nature of the courses" that helps some students succeed in their studies. The committee acknowledged the uniqueness of the M.A. in Biological Thought and the success of this program, as reflected in the response of the students participating in the program.

With regard to **Human Resources** (3.7), the committee indicates again that the Faculty, course coordinators and tutors are dedicated, and relates to the high percentage of course coordinators and tutors who have a PhD degree.

With regard to **infrastructure** (3.8), the committee acknowledged the publishing, printing and distributing of the huge numbers of learning materials, as well as the facilities for distance learning and laboratories.

We also thank the committee for relating to issues we mentioned in our report as weaknesses. We have already begun to work towards solutions, mostly along the lines suggested by the committee.

In **Teaching and Learning** (3.5), the committee is concerned that the courses are not updated as frequently as required. The committee suggests increasing the number of Faculty, increasing the involvement of course coordinators in updating existing courses and outsourcing the updating and development of new courses. It is of note that the obstacle of too few Faculty members reappears in the report several times (see also below). We involve course coordinators in updating existing courses, as much as possible, in accordance with the specific expertise required. In cases where neither a Faculty member nor a coordinator is suitable for updating an existing course, we seek the help of Faculty members in universities other than the OU. A recent example is the recruitment of Prof. Amram Eshel, of the Department of Molecular Biology and Ecology of Plants at Tel Aviv University, who will be in charge of our botany courses.

In addition, the committee is concerned that students lack consultation prior to their enrollment in the study program. We offer consultation to students at any stage of their studies. Indeed, many students participate in consultation prior to the onset of their studies, normally by using the fixed consultation hours that are provided by Faculty members or course coordinators, either by phone or in person. However, since the committee found that some new students feel that they lacked consultation at the

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very first stages, we will instruct the tutors and coordinators of courses on the opening level to inform the students of the possibility of consultation for further studies.

In **B.Sc. Students** (3.6.1), the committee is concerned that "courses are opened on-demand. Thus some may not be available on a yearly basis if only few students register". The committee suggests opening core courses once a year in a specified semester. We agree that this is a constructive solution, and will attempt to implement it, naturally after also considering the budgetary implications.

In **Human Resources** (3.7), the committee indicates several weaknesses and in its recommendations, provides some ideas for solutions:

1) *There are only five senior Faculty members, and this number is too few to cope with the requirements. Accordingly, the recommendation is to increase the Faculty to 7 or 8.* We agree with this recommendation, and in fact, we are currently in the process of adding one new faculty member. The target of 7 or 8 faculty members is one which will take longer to reach. It is important to note that the senior Faculty members in Life Sciences are part of the Natural Sciences department, and work in cooperation with other Faculty members in the department.

2) *Course coordinators have no job security. They are hired only when a course is opened. As a possible solution, the recommendation is to provide multi-year contracts.* Indeed course coordinators had no job security in terms of the scope of their positions when the report was written. Since then, the University management has reached an agreement with the tutors and course coordinators that greatly improves this situation.

3) *Course coordinators have no academic recognition although their contribution to teaching is essential. The committee recommends establishing a special academic status that honors the course coordinators without additional financial obligations to the OU.* This aspect will be addressed when the new agreement with the course coordinators is implemented.

4) *There is no mechanism that enables course coordinators to update their own knowledge and to be involved in research. The committee recommends establishing such a mechanism.* Such mechanisms do exist today, though we agree they only partially answer the needs of course coordinators in life sciences. The Research Authority provides course coordinators with sabbaticals and travel grants to scientific meetings. However, in the life sciences, a one-semester sabbatical is not enough to conduct research and such research requires financial resources, not only time. We will continue to explore other avenues to answer this unquestionable need.

5) *Tutors have no job security and payment is poor, although their role is essential. The committee's recommendation is, for example, to provide yearly contracts and include social benefits in the payment.* This problem was also addressed in the new agreement reached with the course coordinators and tutors.

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Concerning **Research** (3.9) the committee indicates that *research at the OUI is not comparable to that conducted in “traditional universities”*. This is mainly due to the facts that *a) there are no research laboratories on OUI campus and research is conducted at other institutions and (b) the small number Faculty that is required to cover a wide range of teaching disciplines, rather than critical masses of research strength.*

We agree with these observations but would like to stress that in spite of the above challenges the life science faculty comprises a very small group of researchers, which nevertheless gives rise to cooperation and synergies, and produces superior output in terms of publications, grants, and of organization and participation in international and national conferences as well as departmental symposia.

In their **General Recommendations** (4), the committee members stress the strengths of the life sciences program at the OU including the *open access to all B.Sc. study programs, the very effective combination of distance self-learning with distributed teaching at 55 country-wide centers and the flexible self-controlled pace of studies.*

All the recommendations in section 4 have been addressed in our responses above.

We would like to thank the members of the committee again for their efforts.

Sincerely,



Prof. Judith Gal-Ezer

Cc:

Prof. Nahum Finger, The Council for Higher Education

Prof. Hagit Messer-Yaron, President, OU

Michal Neuman, The Council for Higher Education, Head of the Quality Assessment Unit

Prof. Itzhak Dotan, Head, Dept. of Natural & Life Sciences, OU

Prof. Anat Barnea, Head of Life Science group, OU

Dr. Ronit Bogler, Quality assessment coordinator, OU

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**הת Yiishnoot Limodim Letoar :**

משך זמן הלימודים התקני לתואר הוא עד 10 שנים.

בתוך 10 שנים חייב לפנות לוועדה לאישור \*סטודנט שצופה שלא השלים את לימודיו לתואר תכניות לימודים :

אם יש לו תכנית לימודים מאושרת – עליו לבקש אישור מחדש של התכנית.

אם אין לו תכנית לימודים מאושרת – عليه להגיש לאישור תכנית לימודים שתהיה מותאמת לדרישות הלימודים החלות עליו בעת הגשתה.

הוועדה לאישור תכניות לימודים תשקל אם לחייב את הסטודנט בדרישות נוספות או בלימוד קורסים נוספים עקב הת Yiishnoot.

הוועדה תקבע גם את משך תוקף האישור החדש או המחדש.

**הערה**

חברי הוועדה ממליצים לוועדה להכרה בלימודים קודמים להצמיד התנאי זמן להכרה הניתנת בקורסים שבהם קיים חשש לה Yiishnoot. התנאי אמור למונע מצבים שבהם אנו מכירים בקורס שנלמד במוסד אחר ואינו מכירnos בקורס דומה שנלמד באו"פ באותה התקופה. ככלمر יש לוודא שהתנאיות הזמן של ההכרה בלימודים קודמים תואם לשך הלימודים המוגדר תקני, או לתוקף הנitin לאישור של תכנית הלימודים, כאשר הוא קיים.

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\* הכוונה לתכניות לתואר הללו:

- בוגר אוניברסיטה במדעי הטבע בהדגשת כימיה
- בוגר אוניברסיטה במדעי החיים בהדגשת ביוטכנולוגיה
- בוגר אוניברסיטה במדעי החיים בהדגשת לימודי שדה
- בוגר אוניברסיטה במדעי החיים
- בוגר אוניברסיטה (B.Sc.) בכימיה ובמדעי החיים
- בוגר אוניברסיטה (B.Sc.) במתמטיקה ובכימיה
- בוגר אוניברסיטה (B.Sc.) במדעי המחשב ובכימיה
- בוגר אוניברסיטה בפסיולוגיה ובמדעי החיים
- בוגר אוניברסיטה במדעי החיים ובכלכלה
- בוגר אוניברסיטה בתכנון ובנייהול

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