

July 4, 2011

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

We thank the committee for its important comments raised in the general report. Follows is our response to some of these comments:

With regards to the **Status of education and research in ecology, evolution and biodiversity in Israel's universities** (3.3), the committee points out that the situation in these fields is either declining or nearly non-existent. In this regard, we are pleased that in its specific report regarding the OU (September 2010) the committee positively indicated that we have several ecology courses, including traditional field courses. We are also aware (as the committee previously pointed out in its specific report) that we still lack advanced courses in these fields. However, since we wrote our self-evaluation report, we added two advanced courses in these fields: "Biodiversity and nature conservation" and "Integrative project in field studies". In addition, we are now in the process of planning a graduate program in Natural and Environmental Sciences at the OU, which will include, among others, courses in Ecology and Biodiversity that will be offered also to 3rd year undergraduates.

Nevertheless, we completely agree with the deep concern which is raised by the committee regarding the general nationwide situation. As a (partial) solution and improvement at the nationwide level, we would like to suggest a different approach, rather than the traditional one, in which each university acts independently: We suggest developing interuniversity courses, which will be very effective and more

economic in this respect. Such interuniversity courses will be offered to students from all universities (similar to existing courses given at Sde-Boker by BGU or in Eilat by the Interuniversity Institute). A nationwide approach of pooling human resources in the fields of ecology, evolution and biodiversity has many advantages:

First, since relevant researchers are distributed in several universities, such interuniversity courses in which several researchers from several universities join forces, will enable all students to be exposed to the best lecturers in each field.

Second, such an approach is even more essential in light of the data given by the committee in its general report, indicating that the proportion of faculty specializing in biodiversity-related disciplines in Israeli universities, out of the total number of faculty positions, is continuously declining.

Moreover, it is worth thinking about courses that will be interdisciplinary, naming courses in which field trips, for example, will be taught simultaneously by several lecturers (e.g. a botanist, a zoologist, and a geologist). This will enable students to acquire a deep understanding of the complexity of ecosystems and the factors that shape and influence them.

Finally, in regards to the theoretical aspects that involve lectures in such interdisciplinary courses, the OU can provide the platform. This is because the OU specializes in distance teaching and uses innovative and advanced teaching technologies, including internet, interactive instruction through broadband communication, multimedia, home-lab kits, virtual labs, etc. Using these technologies will enable students from different universities to study the same material, taught by the best experts in the country, without time or place restrictions.

With regards to **Academic inbreeding** (3.4), the two aspects which are referred to by the committee are not relevant to the OU, because so far we do not offer higher degrees in Life Sciences. Therefore, our graduates who continue their studies do so at other universities. Similarly, new faculty members that the OU recruits gain their training (M.Sc, Ph.D, postdoc) at other universities, in Israel or abroad.

Finally, with regards to **Financial support for students** (3.5), the focus which the general report puts on Masters and PhD students is similarly not directly relevant to the OU, because of the same reason, that we still do not offer higher degrees in Life Sciences. Nevertheless, it is somehow relevant to the OU because many of our senior faculty members co-supervise M.Sc. and Ph.D. students who are enrolled at other universities, and the OU often partially shares the costs of their fellowships. In such cases we always align our support with the level that is accepted at the other university in which the co-supervised student is enrolled. Therefore, we strongly agree with the committee that it is of a national interest to ensure that students get basic, equal, and sufficient financial support.

We would like to thank the members of the committee again for their efforts throughout this long process of evaluation of the Biology/Life Sciences study programs. We appreciate very much the amount of work that the committee invested in this process and believe that its conclusions will contribute to the improvement of this field in the Israeli universities.

Sincerely,



Prof. Judith Gal-Ezer

Vice President for Academic Affairs

Cc:

Prof. Nahum Finger, The Council for Higher Education

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

Prof. Hagit Messer-Yaron, President, OUI

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

Dr. Ronit Bogler, Quality assessment coordinator at the OUI