



Committee for the Evaluation of General History & Jewish History
Study-programs

**Department of History, Philosophy
and Judaic Studies
The Open University of Israel
Evaluation Report**

August 2007

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Chapter 1- Background

At its meeting on March 8th, 2005 the Council for Higher Education (hereinafter: the CHE) decided to evaluate study programs in the fields of General and Jewish History during the academic year 2005-2006.

Following the decision of the CHE, the Minister of Education who serves ex officio as a Chairperson of the CHE, appointed a committee consisting of:

- Professor Anita Shapira - Jewish History Department, Tel-Aviv University, Committee Chairman
- Professor Jehuda Reinharz - President of Brandeis University, USA¹
- Professor Peter Schaefer - Department of Religion, Princeton University, USA
- Professor Jay Winter - History Department, Yale University, USA
- Professor Myriam Yardeni - Department of General History, University of Haifa

During the on-site visits, there was a need to recruit two additional committee members²:

- Prof. Yosef Kaplan – Department of the History of Jewish People, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem³
- Prof. Emmanuel Sivan – Department of History, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem⁴

Within the framework of its activity, the committee was requested to⁵:

1. Examine the self-evaluation reports, which were submitted by institutions that provide study programs in General and Jewish History, and to hold on-site visits at those institutions.
2. Present the CHE with final reports for the evaluated academic units and study programs - a separate report for each institution, including the committee's findings and recommendations, together with the response of the institutions to the reports.
3. To submit to the CHE a report regarding its opinion as to the examined field of study within the Israeli system of higher education. The committee will submit a separate report to the CHE in this matter.

The first stage of the quality assessment process consisted of self-evaluation by the institutions. This process was conducted in accordance with the CHE's Guidelines for Self-Evaluation (of October 2005) and on the basis of the Specific Questions for the Fields of General and Jewish History which were compiled by the committee.

¹ Prof. Reinharz took part in the early phases of the committee's work, but due to illness was unable to join the committee for the site visits and participate in writing of the reports

²Two committee members from abroad were unable to serve due to illness; we are grateful to Professors Kaplan and Sivan for standing in at short notice.

³ Prof. Kaplan participated only in the evaluation of the Department of Jewish History at Tel Aviv University

⁴ Prof. Sivan participated only in the evaluation of the Department of History at Tel Aviv University.

⁵The Document with Terms of Reference of the committee is attached as **Appendix 1**

Chapter 2 - Committee Procedures

The Committee held its first meeting on March 5, 2006, during which it discussed fundamental issues concerning General and Jewish History study programs in Israel and the quality assessment activity.

During the months of July and August 2006 the committee members received the self-evaluation reports and in September 2006 they began to hold discussions regarding these reports.

In October and November 2006 the committee members conducted a full-day visit to each of the eleven departments (in six universities). During the visits, the committee met with the academic leadership of the institution and that of the academic units under evaluation, representatives of committees, academic staff members, teaching assistants and students.

In accordance with the committee's request, the institution publicized in advance the fact of the committee's visit and it invited academic staff members, administrative staff and students to meet with the committee in order to sound out their opinions concerning the history study programs offered at the University.

This report deals with the Department of History, Philosophy and Judaic Studies, the Open University of Israel

The committee's visit to the Department of History took place on November 2, 2006. The schedule of the visit, including the list of participants representing the institution, is attached as Appendix 2.

The committee members thank the management of the University and the Department of History, Philosophy and Judaic Studies for their self-evaluation report and hospitality towards the committee during its visit to the institution.

Chapter 3 -The Department of History, Philosophy and Judaic Studies

Program and structure

Compared to other universities, which prioritize research, the Open University focuses on teaching, and regards it as its main goal.

The OU accepts all students, without any prior academic requirements. Using distance learning techniques, and deploying learning centers all over the country, it is dedicated to providing access to higher education to one and all. This is an important social and cultural service.

The OU views multi-culturalism as essential. This perspective frames its program in history. It aims at integrating the teaching of Western, Jewish and Islamic histories. While there are courses and teaching programs focused on each of the three, there are also a number of courses that integrate them. In preparation there are courses in global history.

The history department is rather new, though courses in history have formed part of the OU programs for the last 20 years. The department is defined as department of History, Philosophy and Judaic Studies. A student in the department is someone who has taken 4 courses in history. According to this criterion, about 900 students in history are registered at the time of this enquiry (in November 2006).

The program of study includes 3 levels of courses: introductory, intermediate and advanced, each of which covers three eras: ancient, medieval and early modern, and modern. The students have to read course materials and prepare various assignments in writing, moving gradually from elementary answers to questions up to seminar papers. In addition to that, the students are required to take 12 credits outside history lessons.

Being a distance-learning institution, the OU is not restricted by the availability of teachers or their location. Their motto is "the text is the teacher." As a result, it can open courses according to demand. Being aware of the difficulty of most students with self-learning, it provides them with learning centers, located wherever there is demand, where they can meet a tutor face to face. In most courses, the meetings occur every second week. More intensive instruction takes place in weekly classes.

The OU provides courses in workplaces, according to demand. It allows high school students to take selected courses as well. And the institution runs distance-learning outside Israel for many people stationed or working abroad. The OU develops courses on the internet, including interaction between tutor and student.

Staff

The faculty is organized on 3 levels: senior staff (9 members), coordinators (25 members), and tutors (53 members). The senior staff is employed under conditions similar to those in other universities; yet the OU does not operate a tenure system. Their assignments focus primarily on the development of new programs and course materials, supervision of the work of the coordinators, and general team work of the OU. There is no interaction between the senior staff and the students.

The coordinators are the backbone of the OU. They sometimes write the course books, or at least the study guides that accompany the books; they engage in instruction or instruct the tutors; and they provide the structure of the lessons. They also frequently check the assignments and the seminar papers students write. Until lately, their status did not reflect their key role in the system. They were considered as junior staff in the university, despite the fact that about 30% of them have Ph.D. degrees. Many of them have been employed at the OU for many years, with no involvement in the decision-making processes at the OU, and without any job security. They are employed according to the demand for their courses, and unsurprisingly, this causes uncertainty and frustration. The feeling of bitterness and deprivation is very pronounced among this group. The OU authorities are well-aware of this problem and intend to remedy it, by defining the coordinators as academic staff, offering them a promotion track, a stable position, and involving them in the decision-making institutions of the OU. The tutors, who are mostly M.A. graduates, also feel quite bitter, as they are temporarily employed each semester, according to the demand for the courses.

Teaching

Distance learning depends on the materials produced by the university. The OU invests considerable effort and resources to publish high-level study materials, written by prominent scholars. Production values in the publications of the Open University are meticulous and well presented and illustrated. There is a problem with the updating of the books and courses. It takes about 10 years between the publishing of a book and its updating. As a result, some of the material used by the students is outdated. Most of the books do not provide an index, the absence of which students rightly complained about.

One other element which needs attention is that courses offered in the history of the 19th and 20th centuries are too few.

The OU offers students teaching materials through the web. However, many students do not master computer skills and cannot easily access these materials.

The OU provides the students with learning materials in Hebrew. The students are not capable of reading English, a fact which can bar them from further studies.

The OU provides the students with instruction in learning skills, especially reading and writing, in workshops that help students with their written assignments, seminar works and exams. This practice seems well in advance of that in other conventional universities.

Students have to wait at times for a year or even two years for the opening of a course because of low demand. Moreover, the range of such courses is also poor, because of the same reason. Nowadays 70% of the courses are taught in the center of the country. Considering the fact that the OU boasts about its contribution to society (and rightly so), it must do more to supply courses in the periphery.

Students

The committee received an impression that students are very satisfied with their studies at OU. The students who met with the committee are mature people, they enjoy learning at their own pace. They feel that the OU provides them with excellent teaching materials and instruction, and the skills they need for learning at the point in their lives when they can make the most of the opportunity.

Students with learning deficiencies are encouraged to study and succeed in getting degrees, many with high marks.

Library

Learning and teaching in the OU do not require the intensive use of a library. The library is poor and would not be considered adequate in any conventional university. In distance-learning facilities throughout the country the staff and the students are referred to local university libraries.

Infrastructure

The new campus of the OU in Raanana is modern, well furnished and attractive, and provides for all the needs of a modern distance-learning facility.

The students who study at the learning centers complained about the holding of classes in rundown buildings, which are dirty and below accepted standards. The OU authorities informed the Committee that the situation in Tel Aviv (one of the centers the students complained about) is about to change with the renovation of the old campus of the OU in Ramat Aviv. The condition of classes in the periphery still needs to be addressed.

Self-Evaluation Process

The OU has a culture of constant self-evaluation. The OU has a data base, which documents and assesses all developments in staff, classes, students, and processes them. Thanks to the process of self-evaluation, the staff "discovered" its existence, and opened up many avenues for the betterment of the institution.

The culture of self-assessment is part of everyday practice in the OU:

Every proposal for a new course/book is sent for evaluation by leading scholars in the field. These initiatives also pass through strict academic peer review inside the OU.

At the end of each semester a survey of teaching is performed in each course, assessing its strength and weakness, and drawing conclusions for the future.

Every tutor is offered constant instruction and supervision by his/her coordinator.

Every month the senior faculty meets to discuss the program and future development.

In 1999 and in 2005 the OU conducted special surveys of history teaching.

General Recommendations:

1. Structural tensions

The tension between the three levels of instruction in the OU needs to be addressed. There is less vertical integration than the process requires to function optimally. Excellent course materials and well thought-out course structures provide excellent opportunities for learning. But much depends on the flow of information and ongoing linkages between the core faculty at Ra'anana, the coordinators in the regional centers and the tutors at the base of the program.

2. The establishment of a national center for the acquisition of language skills

The Committee proposes that the OU establish a center for language learning, which can serve all universities in the country.

Other Recommendations:

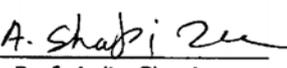
1. The OU excels and leads in the use of distance learning technology, yet this potential is not used to its full capacity by the students who do not have the necessary skills. The OU should require all its students to take a course in computer skills.
2. The OU should establish a procedure which will ensure that courses are checked and if need be, updated, every 5 years.
3. The OU should ensure that all new course booklets and materials have an index to help students use them.
4. The OU should require of its students proficiency in reading course materials in English.
5. The OU must prioritize the development of courses in the history of the 19th and 20th centuries, and must report to the Council for Higher Education how many courses it intends to develop and how long it takes to make them functional.

6. If the OU wishes to have a BA program in history, it must provide the students with an adequate number of courses in all parts of the country, so that they could finish their studies in 4 years. This should be a condition for the continuation of the program.
7. The question of access to Open University course work for high school students should be addressed by the Council for Higher Education.
8. The question of intensive instruction (frontal lectures) that takes place on a weekly basis should be addressed by the Council for Higher Education.

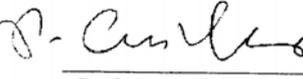
Implementation of the recommendations

The committee recommends that the institution will submit a progress report to the CHE within two years.

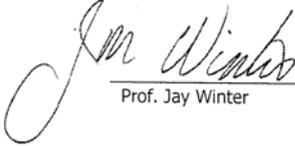
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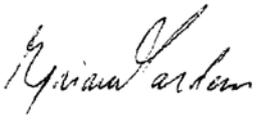
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Prof. Peter Schaefer



Prof. Jay Winter



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