



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

**History Department  
Tel Aviv University  
Evaluation Report**

**August 2007**

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## **Chapter 1- Background**

At its meeting on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 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, USA<sup>1</sup>
- 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 members<sup>2</sup>:

- Prof. Yosef Kaplan – Department of the History of Jewish People, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem<sup>3</sup>
- Prof. Emmanuel Sivan – Department of History, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem<sup>4</sup>

Within the framework of its activity, the committee was requested to<sup>5</sup>:

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.

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<sup>1</sup>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.

<sup>2</sup>Two 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.

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

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

<sup>5</sup>The 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 General and Jewish History study programs offered at the University.

### **This report deals with the History Department, Tel Aviv University**

The committee's visit to the Department of History took place on November 21, 2006.

Prof. Shapira, the staff member in the Department of Jewish History, did not participate in the evaluation process of the institution. Prof. Winter served as a chairperson of the committee during the visit to Tel Aviv University.

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, the Faculty of Humanities and the History Department for their self-evaluation report and for their hospitality towards the committee during its visit to the institution.

## **Chapter 3 – History Department, Tel Aviv University**

### **1. Teaching Staff**

The History Department has suffered a loss of manpower of major proportions in the past decade. It now has 25.5 full time teaching equivalents compared to 40 in 1994/5. Still, its 18 professors, 8 senior lecturers, and 1 lecturer provide more than adequate coverage of all four temporal periods of instruction. This is by far the largest department of its kind in the country, and the faculty's international reputation is well deserved. The department is particularly strong in the early modern period. Distinguished scholars in medieval and modern history will retire soon, raising questions as to adaptations needed should replacements not be made.

The fact that there is only one lecturer is troubling, in particular with respect to the future age structure of the department. And though the historian in question has been teaching in the department for some time, our visit was the first time anyone had asked him about his views on the department and its future trajectory. His integration into the work of the department probably will, but certainly must be, undertaken soon.

### **2. Study program**

The department is the home of approximately 672 students. Of these, 534 are in the B.A. program, 105 in the M.A. program and 33 are en route to their PhDs. This is a substantial decline from the level of 2003 when 821 students were registered formally as history students for all degrees. In particular, the decline in B.A. students is striking, lower by more than 100 from the level of 2003-5, and falling to the 2001 level five years later. The decline in the size of the student population is reflected as well in a decline in the number of graduates per year as well. Some of the shortfall in student numbers may be attributed to the development of East Asian studies, previously centred in the history department. In addition, it is necessary to take account of dropouts – registering roughly one-third of all those who start the B.A. degree. The source of this unfortunate waste of resources is unclear. Some choose other departments, which is no bad thing; others feel economic or familial pressures and leave; others may be put off by the size of classes. In any event, the reduction of the proportion of students who leave the department and then leave the university must be a priority for the department.

The great strength of the department is that it provides *targilim* taught by senior members of the faculty in the first year. Given that the rate of decline in the overall number of teachers is greater than the rate of decline in the number of students, this has meant overcrowding in *targilim*, which students must take in their first year. Some *targilim* have been replaced by lectures, which is unfortunate, but inevitable.

The department services large numbers of students from other departments. Roughly one-third of students in classes in the history department are not registered in the department. In total roughly 850 undergraduates take

history courses each year, a substantial number, the provision for which stretches the history department to the limit.

On the postgraduate level, the department is a participant in two important structures: the School of History, which is responsible for doctoral studies in six academic units (History, Classics, Middle Eastern and African History, History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas, Geography and the Environment and Arabic Language and Literature), and the History Teaching Partnership, which brings together teaching assets in other departments within the structure of graduate studies. In this teaching partnership the Departments of History, Jewish History, and Middle Eastern and African History have come together:

1. To offer a mandatory two hour course taught by individuals from all three departments.
2. To consider courses in all three departments as optional choices for students.
3. To foster greater flexibility and 'cross-feeding' of course offerings among the departments in the federation, in such a way as to enable history students to build their own programs of study, incorporating history courses across the departments.

This initiative is an important one, and must be monitored to ensure its implementation. We particularly commend the openness of the department to enabling its staff to offer jointly-taught courses, which is probably the only way to ensure that multiple viewpoints and approaches are represented in the classroom.

The overall teaching program reflects the tendency in other parts of the world to treat history in a trans-national manner. While more can be done in this direction, the department is to be commended for its up-to-date range of course offerings, which can stand comparison with the best departments elsewhere in the world.

### **3. Library and infrastructure**

The state of the human capital in the department is excellent; the same cannot be said for the material capital which the department needs to fulfill its program and mission. The department is housed in the Gilman building, which is in need of serious refurbishment; offices are in most cases small and inadequate.

The same must be said for the Central Library. The library budget for acquisitions has been reduced by one-third in recent years, which amounts to at least a 50 percent reduction in real terms. Inter-library loan helps somewhat, but it is no substitute for maintaining the Library. With purchasing power cut by half, it is impossible for the University Library to service the manifold teaching needs of the department, let alone act as an anchor for its international reputation as a centre for historical research. The deterioration in the material position of the Library is incontrovertible. There is much that has been done to compensate in terms of online access to course materials, but technology cannot reverse a manifest deterioration in the holdings and structure of the library.

Our meetings were held in a room in which the department displayed the publications of the staff over the last decade or so. These were most impressive, but there is not the slightest doubt that without a massive injection of capital in the library, the department will be unable to do what its members are paid to do – to teach history and to write history at the highest standards.

## **Chapter 4 - Recommendations for the department**

1. There is room for the department to formalize its evaluation of teaching in such a way as to upgrade its significance. The Department already has a teaching committee, with the department head as its chair. We suggest instead that the committee comprise three senior faculty members, without the chair. This committee would be in charge of teaching quality control.
  - A. Their remit is to ensure that there is no overlapping between courses, that teachers change the topics of classes and themes addressed in them every few years. They will check the syllabi and approve them.
  - B. The members of the teaching committee will visit classes of younger and external scholars on a regular basis, and no less than twice a semester, and will report to the Chair on their findings. They will review the students' teaching evaluations, and take the necessary steps with regard to teachers whose evaluations are not adequate. In case of repeatedly poor performance, the teacher will be strongly advised take a remedial course in teaching. This applies to senior teachers as well. Student evaluations will be placed alongside grade distributions for each course to control for market effects.
2. The chair of the department should initiate every year a discussion in the department regarding the curriculum, with the aim of fostering a culture in which teaching is a collective responsibility of the department as a whole. This discussion would enable the department to update the program taking into account trends in other countries and new developments in inter-active and web-based learning.
3. Teachers should organize class meetings in the library, in particular when seminar papers are due. This procedure will direct students to particular holdings which will be of help to them. At the moment the energy and enthusiasm of librarian is not being fully exploited.
4. There is a need to expand the provision of classes which teach writing with special reference to historical texts. We feel strongly that the teaching of history is inseparable from the writing of history; hence improving the level of Hebrew prose goes hand in hand with improving the level of literacy in reading English.
5. While the syllabi at the M.A. level are very impressive, in particular in Latin American history, there is a need for the development of two courses: (1) A survey of history and the social sciences, either for all M.A. students or only for those producing a thesis; and (2) A course on concepts and methods for doctoral students, deepening their knowledge of history and the social sciences and enabling them to study ways in which an interdisciplinary approach could be of use in solving problems in their specific field of research. These seminars

would also help students handle the problems of isolation which are so common among postgraduate students.

6. While professional service in the form of editing academic journals is admirable, it frequently is accomplished at the expense of individual publications. The fact that there are six journals edited from within the department is a possible drain on the productivity of scholars, and younger scholars in particular. One way to handle this problem is to reduce the teaching loads of those responsible for heavy editorial work. Given the pressure on manpower in the department, this option is probably not viable; hence it may be in everyone's interests to curtail editorial responsibilities within the department.

7. Evaluation

The department's report was thoughtful, clearly written and informative. The department as a whole was open to suggestions and saw the need to imbed evaluation into the culture of the department. One fault that should be corrected is that the weight of producing the report fell on the shoulders of a young and highly productive member of the department. He did receive course relief for this task, but it really should rest on the shoulders of older and more senior members of the department and on the collective as a whole.

8. Doctoral supervision

There is a need to ensure that supervisors of doctoral dissertations are equipped to supervise their advanced students. In almost all areas of history, a knowledge of the language in which the archival material used in doctoral dissertations in a field is necessary not only for the student but also for the supervisor. A command of the secondary literature is essential too. Thus even senior historians skilled in one field may not be the right supervisors for students who want to work in another field. The department needs to ensure the proper fit between the needs of the student and the skills of supervisors. Co-supervision is one way forward here.

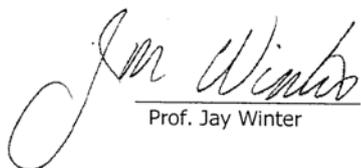
## **Chapter 5 - Recommendations for the University**

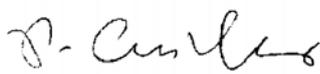
1. The Central Library facilities are deteriorating to the point that teaching and research are endangered. The Gilman building needs major refurbishment as well.
2. There is a need to consider carefully some degree of redirection of the work of the general history department to enable it to provide general courses for all undergraduates, initially in the Faculty of Humanities, but potentially for undergraduates throughout the University. This provision could be made within the framework of a 'core curriculum', defined variously as foundation courses for scientists, social scientists, and those studying the humanities. Here is a pathway towards increasing the profile of the department within the university and increasing the number of students studying history throughout the university.

### **Implementation of the recommendations**

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

### **SIGNED BY**

  
Prof. Jay Winter

  
Prof. Peter Schaefer

  
Prof. Emmanuel Sivan

  
Prof. Myriam Yardeni