Review of Communication Departments’ Implementation Reports to the Council of Higher Education

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General Remarks

The Council for Higher Education has asked me to review and assess the implementation reports submitted by the heads of departments of the following six institutions in the field of communication (in alphabetical order): Ben-Gurion University, College of Management, Haifa University, Netanya Academic College, Sapir Academic College, and Tel-Aviv University. The author was a member of CHE’s Committee for the Evaluation of Communication Studies (further on: “Committee”), chaired by Prof. Joseph T. Cappella (University of Pennsylvania) and had his share in the seven reports (six institutions plus overall situation of communication studies in Israel). I therefore feels equipped to review the implementation reports based on the Committee’s recommendations.

My starting point will always be the short-term as well as middle- and long-term recommendations and I will check if and how these have been addressed in the reports. However, I will, where appropriate, also take parts from our main texts into consideration because they conveyed additional evidence and rationale to the institutions that might have been used as guidelines in the implementation process.

A final remark: I am not a native speaker in the English language. I apologize beforehand for any mistakes and or ambiguities in expression that, I hope, will not affect the reception of my judgments.
PART I: IMPLEMENTATION REPORTS

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Two general impressions to begin with: First, the implementation report, in its systematic, does not fully follow the Committee’s recommendations. It develops its own structure by also taking some of the Committee’s observations from the main text and responding to them (even when those were not transferred into recommendations). This made the reviewer’s task unnecessarily more complex and time consuming.

Second, the report centers around one single issue: the denial of a Bachelor program. The criticism of this decision (it is obvious throughout the text) that the institution is very upset about this) overlaps almost every other dimension in the response. It is correct that the Committee talks about the opening of a Bachelor program solving some of the problems of the institution. But, as this was not our mandate and the decision is not in the hands of the Department, this is not part of the recommendations, and by far not – as the institution writes, „the Committee’s chief recommendation“. Instead, the Committee explicitly wrote: “Our committee’s role did not include evaluation of the proposed undergraduate major.” Citing from the Committee report:

“The department is at a crossroads with one road leading toward growth and another toward the status quo and possibly stagnation. Growth and development may result from the addition of a BA degree in communication. Whether such a program will aid or hinder the department’s growth and development depends in large measure on the structure and content of that program. Our committee’s role did not include evaluation of the proposed undergraduate major.”

We continued by saying that a Bachelor program might enhance the existing strengths of the Department in three areas: (1) focus on content strengths in new media, media industries, and minorities in the media, (2) adequate resources; and being complementary to existing programs of research and training. Our recommendation, thus, consisted of a scenario or an “in-case-of” plan should a new program be licensed. It did not consist of this recommendation per se.

Thus, the existing situation of a non-approved B.A. program at Ben Gurion University did not release the institution from addressing all other points rather than battling the CHE decision. The official implementation report was, therefore, imbalanced as the chair spend the majority of his report with this
single topic (which was amended by a letter of the dean asking for the same revision of the decision) while the majority of the Committee’s recommendations go uncommented.

In the meantime the CHE has approved the department’s request to submit an application for the establishment of an undergraduate program. Also, an additional letter by the department chair, the dean, and the vice-rector of Ben Gurion University supplied after the first draft of the review of the implementation report was written (dated October 29, 2012) and obviously requested by CHE shows that the department has addressed more of the issues raised in the Committee’s recommendations than appeared in the implementation report. But it becomes also clear that the department sees in the start of an undergraduate program too much of a cure-all measure. In four of the five recommendations addressed the launching of an undergraduate program is seen as a solution to the problems assessed by the Committee. This indicates a too narrow approach to these problems.

Of the ten short-term recommendations the original implementation report by BGU left nine basically unaddressed. The additional report corrects this only to a certain extent.

- Recommendation to introduce a regular program of ‘progress check’ (workshops which bring students together to discuss any issues, maintain identity with the course and with each other, make explicit the shared experience of the ‘lonely scholar’ syndrome; and encourage peer support): I find only one very general remark that the institution added a mandatory course “Academic Literacy” to improve M.A. students’ academic skills (repeated in the recent letter). While this is certainly a valuable topic in any program it does not speak to the concern that we discovered, i.e. the ‘lonely scholar syndrome’, which we found to be a particular problem in this location.

- Recommendation to develop new forms of teaching that integrate evidence from communication research…with teaching practical knowledge about the various fields in the industry: This stays basically not addressed. However, in its October 29th letter the department mentions the plan for a student-run radio station to be part of the students’ practical training.

- Recommendation to make better use of skilled TAs…in undergraduate courses…: not addressed
- Recommendation to solve role problem of M.A. students who are paid to be TAs: not addressed in the first report and expected to change with the introduction of an undergraduate program.

- Recommendation to improve promotion of department and research specializations of faculty in order to attract more research degree students/offer incentives to good MA students to stay on to undertake PhD: This point has been addressed through the hiring of two new faculty members contributing to the existing strengths (see below).

- Recommendation to strengthen the existing procedures for mentoring, monitoring and evaluating teaching competence/Make procedures completely transparent. Introduce regular classroom visits for junior faculty. The Department is very vague about measures taken to enhance teaching quality. They hired a senior lecturer and received permission to recruit an associate professor. Prof. Caspi was appointed mentor to the young staff. While the two new hires will not affect the teaching of existing staff, the newly created position of a mentor (particularly of a very experienced scholar as Prof. Caspi) addresses the Committee’s point to a certain extent. However, other more explicit suggestions (such as classroom visits) go again uncommented. In the more recent letter the department reports two new hires on the level of senior faculty (Nimrod and Schejter). These hires strengthen the foci of the department in media and minorities (Nimrod: media and the aged) and media structure (Schejter: media regulation). Thus, the amendments to the existing faculty follow the Committee’s recommendation to build on the existing strengths in research.

- Recommendation to reconsider all course promotional literature, both hard copy and online, to ensure that it accurately reflects the reality of course provision: This point is not directly addressed. However, the amendment of one course (“Academic Literacy”) and vaguely described changes in others show some activity in this direction.

- Recommendation to improve the overall quality of students entering the M.A. program. Again, the introduction of the undergraduate program is seen by the department as the solution. In addition, the above mentioned course on “Academic Literacy” has been added, the two core courses in theory “revamped”, and “requirements across seminars streamlined”. The text stays too vague about these changes in order to allow an assessment to what extent these changes addressed the points.
- Recommendation to increase interdisciplinary or collaborative projects with national and international colleagues in order to increase the possibility of greater research funding: not addressed.

- Recommendation to target more high-impact journals and significant other publication outlets and develop a strategic approach to publications. In its October 29th letter the department claims that the majority of the publications are now in the Q1 or Q2 ranked journals although no documentation is provided.

On the middle- and long-term recommendations: As mentioned above the implementation report falsely assumes that the Committee recommended the start of a B.A. program (which it did not) and reports about its so far unsuccessful activities to get the respective approval. Given the situation that at the time of the first implementation report the permission to start this new program was not given I miss some deliberations for a strategic plan on the basis of the current situation. A strategic plan was probably even more salient in this (for the Department undesired) situation than in case that the approval was given. The Committee raised the question, for instance, how the Department will cope with the potential loss of the support for the Burda Center but this is, as many other issues, not even mentioned in the report. All in all, both the implementation report and the additional letter of October 29, 2012 leave many recommendations unaddressed and questions unanswered.

In the meantime, CHE has approved that the department can submit an application to start an undergraduate program. However, the implementation of such a program is still undecided. The reviewer has gotten the impression that the department stills sees this new program as a cure for all its problems – which it will not be.
PART II: GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The Council for Higher Education has asked the reviewer for his observations of general effects of the whole QA process, i.e. were there any changes and progress in the field of communication studies in Israel since the QA’s committee’s report as apparent from the institutions implementations reports. As the individual schools’/departments’ situations and problems have been rather different and, consequently, their reports covered many different dimensions there are not many common fields that can be addressed.

Economy of teaching

In its “General Observations about Higher Education in Communication Studies in Israel” the Committee had summarized its impressions in five points of strengths and seven points that represent challenges. Most of these were of a long-term concern and/or could not be addressed by individual organizations because they are part of the larger structure of academic education in the field of communication in Israel. Our major concern then was what we called the “economics of teaching” including the high number of junior faculty teaching core courses, the high teaching load, and the considerable proportion of overall teaching by adjuncts. So far, we have not seen a considerable increase in more senior faculty except for the two new hires at Ben Gurion University. The department at Tel Aviv University is certainly in a fringe situation jeopardizing the overall potential to offer a program at a standard as it can be expected from such an acknowledged institution.

Quality of teaching

Several of our recommendations for multiple departments related to the quality of teaching, either by asking for tighter procedures to assess this quality in individual classes, or by recommending to focus on more up-to-date research. I can see from the implementation reports that the departments/schools have accepted this advice and taken appropriate measures. As the quality of teaching is a core dimension of the function of these institutions of higher education this is certainly one of the prime outcomes of this quality assessment process. The institutions (and maybe CHE) might even go a step further and develop explicit routines for the assessment of teaching quality. The monitoring of syllabi for their compliance with the state-of-the-art in research, and classroom visits for ensuring that modern didactics are employed has been put on the radar screen of many of the institutions without conveying the (wrong) impression that this quality was low.
Maintaining identity

Our reports (and the institutions’ responses to it) have led in some cases to a stronger self-awareness of foci and specializations. Ben Gurion University has reacted to this when hiring new faculty, others like College of Management (business focus) or Sapir (visual communication) – although they have rejected recommendations made by the Committee – deliberated on their foci or peculiarities and why they think they should be maintained. These processes of ‘self-identification’ are important and should be part of an ongoing self-assessment process independent of but often triggered by CHE’s activities.

Strategic planning

The Committee had also recommended that each institution develop a strategic plan and try to achieve a balance among the three factors that we think are crucial dimensions of their identity, i.e. emphasis, specialization and geography. Particularly given the rapid growth, change, and further diversification of the field of communication not only in Israel such planning is crucial in order to make informed decisions about the development of the program and the allocation of resources.

It is not necessarily the general function of the implementation reports (there, the institutions respond to concrete recommendations made by an evaluation committee) to reflect such strategic planning on the side of the institutions. I therefore cannot blame the institutions for not much referring to such long-term objectives. However, it can be a lesson from this experience that strategic planning should play a more important and more explicit role within the framework of this whole quality assessment process. Institutions could be asked to define their current location on several important dimensions, in which direction they would like to develop these, and how they want to achieve this.

Core identity of communication programs

The evaluation committee had mentioned in its general observation about the state of the communication programs that most of these programs do not combine the training of communication with other fields. We thought and I still think (given the fact of a changing role of professional journalism amidst new communication roles in the digital world) that such a broad-based knowledge not only in the humanities and analytical-critical thinking but also in certain areas of substance will become more and more important. Because such more general recommendations were not part of the individual and concrete suggestions expressed in our reports the institutions did not see a necessity to respond to this. Thoughts about the core identity of
communication programs within higher education could become also part of the self-assessment reports (and not only in communications but any other field as well).

Research areas

In the general observations as well as in some of the individual reports we pointed to the fact that, in their research, some institutions were very much concerned with purely local topics of Israeli communication and media) rather than more general questions pertaining to the field as a whole. Research areas at Netanya College were a case in point. While such more regional topics certainly have their value they will not help to increase the visibility of Israeli communication research on the international stage. Nevertheless, this visibility is – in light of the number of institutions and people involved in communication research in Israel – disproportionally high. It might be a pragmatic division of labor that universities concentrate more on the general theoretical topics while colleges investigate more local issues. While such a division of labor cannot and should not be imposed on the institutions it might be a fair way of evaluating their research output.

Systematic data acquisition and reporting

From reading the implementation reports and the data included or attached to them I still get the impression that there is room for improvement in reporting quantitative indicators of resources and performance. For instance, the data for admission scores supplied by Sapir College cannot be compared to the previous ones in the self-assessment report because in the latter the data were mean values and in the former frequencies in specific brackets. The Council of Higher Education might develop and supply more standardized forms of data gathering and reporting by the academic institutions. This will also help to observe long-term changes in the most important dimensions of academic structure and achievement.

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