

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

by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Donsbach

Technische Universität Dresden/Member of the Evaluation Committee

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

NETANYA ACADEMIC COLLEGE

The Committee recommended four short-term and four middle- or long-term measures all of which are addressed (although not always embraced) by the School of Communication at Netanya Academic College.

- The Committee recommended to make the internship program mandatory for students and to apply a thorough evaluation system for internships via student reports. The School defends its current practice which has external internships at a ratio of 30 to 70 percent with in-school activities. While the main reason for this ratio might be the availability of internship spots in the business the School justifies this by claiming that the learning experience in-school are "as efficient and attractive" as external ones. At least, the School "is considering" making internships (out- or inside the School) mandatory for each student. The School does not say if it developed an evaluation system for internships as suggested by the Committee. But it created the position of an internship coordinator to supervise activities and improve the supply and quality of both external internships and in-school options. Thus, the School has some convincing arguments why internal internships serve the function to prepare students for their jobs but these arguments might come out of necessity. I would still recommend that the School invest more in external internships because these certainly enhance the students' chances on the job market.
- The Committee recommended to experiment with courses co-taught by faculty from more theoretical and more applied orientations working in the same arena in order to enhance the relationship between theory and practice. The School has taken several measures to address this point. First, it urges more of its teaching staff of the practical side to get additional degrees in order to combine their knowledge from the practical field with communication research evidence. Further, already in 2010/11 a mandatory course has been introduced on "Current Affairs in the Media" in which journalists talk about current issues and how they have been handled by the media and one faculty member "contextualizes theoretically" these lectures. A last initiative seems to serve best the Committee's recommendation: The School has created a "Media Lab" taught jointly by one faculty member and one media professional. Students use a theoretical and conceptual framework that they learn in the first semester to develop a professional applied project in the second semester. However, as this is one course out of

many it might not be sufficient to address the general point (not necessarily peculiar to this College) that theoretical and practical courses are usually taught parallel and not in an integrated form.

- The Committee recommended that the School start a regular system of following the career choices of the graduates to receive continuous data helping to evaluate the program. The School has embraced this idea and appointed a senior faculty member to the role of "Graduates Liaison Coordinator". One of the means to stay in contact with alumni is a new Facebook side. The implementation report is silent about the fact whether newer data exist on the professional careers and how exactly the School wants to track these.
- The Committee recommended to review the system of faculty evaluation and to develop a plan for continuous assessments of teaching, particularly for the non-permanent adjunct faculty. The School has developed two measures that both are still in an "experimental" phase: (1) "tutoring" of new faculty and adjunct teachers in college procedures, and school's culture, "facts of life", and "students' DNA" and (2) adding new mechanisms for faculty evaluation. Five senior faculty members have been involved in the tutoring program, each tutoring one younger colleague. The "new mechanism" for faculty evaluation consists of a faculty-student-committee dealing, among other things, with student complaints about courses and teachers. While both are constructive measures they do not fully encompass the Committee's recommendation for a continuous assessment of teaching. The first includes only the (few) new hires, the latter rests exclusively on students' judgments. It might be worthwhile to consider again standard procedures that include all courses taught.
- The Committee recommended that the School broaden the variety in research orientations and thus enhance also the employment opportunities of graduates. The School responds by mentioning four new hires/adjuncts of which only two, however, seems to provide competence in more practical research areas such as public opinion research and PR. "Introductions to Political Thought" or "The Internet and the Middle East" do not particularly represent areas that provide the capabilities that the Committee had in mind.
- A second middle- or long-term recommendation concerned the number of courses that students can take outside the School of Communication. It recommended to enhance this number and to even think of dual majors with other disciplines in order to offer

specializations in substantive courses for the future journalists. The School holds that possibilities for cooperation are very limited because the six other schools in the College have other admission conditions. It also holds that only two out of the other six, Business Administration and Behavioral Studies, would qualify for such cooperation. The latter is not a very convincing argument. Law, Banking, Computer Science-Mathematics, and Insurance can offer a plethora of courses that can be relevant for students of communication. On the other side, only three of the 13 mentioned courses that were added to the program will broaden the training in the sciences and social sciences, the majority, however, in the humanities (like humanistic thought, cultural studies, of feminism and media). It seems that the School either misunderstood the Committee's intention, or did not want to adopt it because it wanted to pursue its own existing path.

- The Committee recommended that the School build on the already existing strong research orientation of the faculty when hiring new faculty members and allocating resources. Three new faculty members were hired with expertise in methods, social psychology, political communication, and new media. The School thus responded to this suggestion.
- The Committee recommended to the leadership of the College that it encourage the faculty to address theoretical and practical issues of broad appeal to other scholars beyond the national borders of Israel in order to contribute to the broader dialogue among scholars cross national boundaries. The School can be applauded for its research and publication activities over the last two years. The report lists over a dozen articles in international peer-reviewed journals, indicating that the leading researchers in the School succeeded not only in delivering high-quality research but also in tackling topics that are of an international relevance. The areas of research span a great variety from framing research, news content to new media.

Overall, the School shows a high responsiveness to the Committee's recommendations. In two areas the measures taken fall short from what one could have expected: There is still room for improvement of a continuous faculty evaluation and of the curricula offered to students. Concerning the latter, the School should be urged to explore further possibilities for cooperation with other schools at Netanya College in order to serve the growing variety in students' needs and expectations as well as the growing diversification in professional fields.

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 – disproportionately 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.

Dresden, November 22, 2012

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Donsbach

