

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

TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Department of Communication at Tel Aviv University (TAU) was applauded by the Committee for its high achievements in research (also by international standards), the collegiality among faculty and with students, and the commitment of the few permanent faculty to the Department and their job. The lack of personnel resources (having decreased since the start of the program) contrasted with increasing numbers of students on the one side and a mismatch between students' expectations and the curriculum led the Committee to some more fundamental recommendations, going beyond the scope of what was proposed to the other units. These suggestions concerned a new supra-structure for communication integrating different units within TAU, replacing the dual major by a single major, abandoning the practical courses in the existing B.A. and M.A. programs taught by the Department, and – instead – offering two separate tracks in theory/research and practice. The Department has struggled with these (and a few minor) recommendations in a positive and constructive way. I will start, however, with the short-term recommendations and how they were addressed by the Department.

- The Committee was concerned about the low number of courses dealing with new media. The Department has made serious efforts to address this issue. It mentions no less than five measures that it taken in this direction, among them, enhancing the number of courses in the B.A. program dealing with new media to now nine, hiring new faculty with a specific expertise in new media, and seeking collaboration with other units such as the Internet Institute at TAU. Changes in the M.A. program are still in the making (the Department plans a new media track) but the Department certainly is aware of this issue.
- The Department did not follow the Committee's suggestion to reconsider the use of workshops. This has to be seen in light of its unwillingness/inability to change the overall structure (see below). Instead, the Department has added a series of new workshops (replacing others) in environmental branding, social marketing, public relations and new television formats.
- The establishment of an internship opportunity for undergraduate students is also still in the planning stage although the Department has embraced the idea. The report explains the delay with the currently

low number of faculty (two senior scholars, Dafna Lemish and Yoram Peri, have left) which limits such activities.

- The Evaluation Report also suggested enhancing procedures for the approval of new courses and/or modules. While the report contains information that new courses are discussed during faculty meetings with “careful consideration...given to the topic and potential teachers” it is vague about the criteria applied in this process. The Department should be applauded, however, for its procedure that now each adjunct faculty member is assigned to one or two of the senior faculty members. The same applies to the implementation of a brainstorming meeting at the beginning of each semester in which all topics related to the quality of teaching are discussed. The Department has decided to hold this meeting at the end of the academic year (rather than at its beginning) in order to focus on experiences. This will probably serve the same needs if these experiences are carried on into the following year. These new procedures will also meet another issue raised by the Committee, i.e. that reading lists are up-to-date and the newest developments in the communication field are taught to students.
- Knowing that this is subject to changes in the TAU’s (or at least the Faculty of the Social Sciences’) overall policies, the Committee suggested to create more incentives for faculty to do research. So far nothing has changed and faculty members still do not get course reduction for successful research grant applications. The Department is (and can be) proud, however, that its research output has stayed on a high level despite this situation.
- The low number of permanent faculty (6.5) was mentioned above as one of the main critical features of the communication program at TAU. This situation has even worsened as two senior scholars have left and one, Akiba Cohen, has retired by now. One scholar (with an expertise in new media, see above) has joined the Department. The Department is waiting for the Rector’s approval for three new hires. It does not become clear from the report if this concerns replacements of these three vacancies or additional positions. However, as the report says that these additions will “enable the Department to reach a minimal 'critical mass' to continue its activities” they probably mean additional positions. Thus, the Department has obviously exhausted its possibilities to improve the situation on the human resources. Give the Committee’s critical assessment of the situation this creates some hope for a better student-faculty ratio than in the past.

A direct comparison of the statistics for senior faculty 2007/8 (as in the self-assessment report) and for the academic year 2012/13 show that indeed the personnel situation at TAU has worsened. While the overall number of senior faculty has more or less stayed the same (plus 0,5 FTE), its average academic rank has been slightly (and formally) lowered (see table). The fact that now the most senior faculty members in the rank of a professor are associate professors does not necessarily indicate a decline in the quality of teaching (one might argue that, on the contrary, younger scholars bring in new ideas and fresh topics). However, the overall resources of the department at TAU are far from being sufficient to teach the increasingly differentiated topics of communication on a high-quality level.

Position	2007/8		2012/13	
	Heads	FTE in deptm	Heads	FTE in deptm
Full professor	2	2	-	-
Assoc.professor	1	1	3	3,0
Senior lecturer	4	3,5	1	1,0
Lecturer	-	-	3	3,0
Total	7	6,5	7	7,0

- As mentioned above, the Committee's *mid- and long-term recommendations* are of a more fundamental nature. Of these, the recommendation that the Department consider switching from a joint to a single degree was probably the least fundamental one. It was the Committee's rationale that a single degree would make room for the growing differentiation in the field of communication. The Department originally rejected this suggestion by pointing to the interdisciplinary nature of communication and the advantage of students' interaction with students in other fields. Interdisciplinarity and interaction are important qualities of a program which the Committee certainly did not want to eliminate. They could, however, also be part of a single degree program that includes a considerable number of courses in adjacent fields. After two other universities in Israel have lately opened a single degree the Department will re-consider this issue and might follow the Committee's recommendation.

- The two fundamental recommendations, offering one theoretical/research and one practical track and re-organizing all activities in communications under one umbrella (a "School of Communication") – are interrelated. The Committee discovered several units within TAU that contribute to education in communication in different ways and more or less unrelated (Department of Communication, Film and Cinema Studies, Koteret, Herzog Institute for Internet Studies). A School of Communication would have housed the various units under a single supra-structure. The Department insists that such a new structure is not possible for several reasons: Students at Koteret have to pay tuition while those in the Faculty of the Social Sciences don't, the Film and Cinema Studies does not admit students from other departments, a grant (Rothschild-Caesarea Foundation) ended. Instead, the Department wants to "thrive and continue to fulfill its missions in teaching and in research within the Faculty (of the Social Sciences)" (p. 4). As far as it concerns the dual track suggestion the Department claims not having "the minimal resources to provide sufficient training in the applied areas.

While I know from my own experience in universities how difficult it is to change structures I cannot see if the Department has seriously considered such options and exhausted the possibilities for strategic planning and hard negotiations. The Committee's argument for a cooperation of the different units came out of the evidence that the Department itself lacks the resources for a sufficient practical training of its students and that these resources could be procured from the Koteret School. It also came out of its evidence that many undergraduate students come with wrong assumptions of what the B.A. program is really about and that such expectations could be met through alternative tracks.

It is impossible to judge from outside whether there are more options for restructuring education and research in the whole field of communication at TAU. In particular, it is impossible to judge whether the mismatch between one unit with and one without tuition can be overcome. While the Department of Communication has implemented most of the short-term recommendations it has rejected all of the middle- and long-term ones. However, the report is very explicit about the reasons why faculty and dean felt that they could not embrace the suggestions. The obvious structural constraints are perhaps amended by institutional and personal averseness that is, however, hard to assess from outside.

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.

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