

Responses to the Committee for the Evaluation of Public Policy and Administration Study Programs Report

by

The Department of Public Policy, Tel-Aviv University

Summary of main points and responses

- The committee found the economics orientation of the Department of Public Policy at Tel-Aviv University – which is unique in the academic scene in Israel – as “a valuable addition to the purely descriptive stance of the ‘policy studies’ tradition”
- The committee wrote that the contribution of Department members to the public policy discussions in Israel has been very important and “precisely the sort of activity, unrewarded in most disciplinary departments, for which policy programs should provide a home.”
The committee recommends that such activity be included together with traditional academic activity in promotion decisions. The Department strongly agrees with this recommendation.
- The committee wrote that the Department was “strongly affected by the resource cutbacks at the university in recent years,” and recommends that faculty slots be added to it.
It also states that such slots should be full-time and not shared with other departments to enable the Department to fully realize its academic and public policy potential. The Department strongly agrees with both recommendations.
- The committee believes that much would be gained by “cross-fertilization” between the Department’s executive and regular degree programs. The Department agrees with this recommendation.
- The committee states that the orientation of public policy programs should be towards a more professional education. The Department agrees and is taking steps in this direction.
- The committee recommends that MA thesis and PhD programs in Public Policy be reevaluated. The committee feels that these programs lead students into less professional directions that are unnecessary and the elimination of such programs would free up scarce resources for the Departments in other areas of activity. The Department disagrees with the committee and believes that they emanate from a misunderstanding by the committee of Israeli universities that could lead to very problematic and undesired outcomes as specified in the full responses below.
- The committee feels that curricular content be changed not only in the direction of more professional studies, but also that fewer topics need to be covered and that these should be dealt with more intensively. The Department agrees. It has already begun to implement some changes and will discuss further curriculum changes along the lines suggested by the Committee during the upcoming academic year.

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Tel-Aviv University's Public Policy Department

General Review

note: text in italics is quoted from the reports while non-italic text reflects responses by Tel-Aviv University's Public Policy Department.

Positive comments

- *The Tel Aviv program is the most economics-oriented of the Israeli public policy programs, dominated by economists rather than political scientists. As a result, students learn frankly prescriptive and evaluative modes of analysis; this strikes the committee as a valuable addition to the purely descriptive stance of the "policy studies" tradition.*
- *The faculty also seems to be doing something to adapt disciplinary material to the needs of public policy teaching; the economics and statistics courses give significant number of public policy examples, and use class exercises as well as lectures.*
- *We are impressed that a faculty dominated by economists seems to be happy to have a program chair from another discipline, and that the economists agree that, for the good of the program, the next faculty hire needs to be someone from public management rather than economics.*
- *Some members of the faculty have also been relatively active and visible in getting involved in public policy discussions in Israel more broadly, both at the level of public advocacy and consulting to governmental institutions. Some have written policy papers making policy recommendations: precisely the sort of activity, unrewarded in most disciplinary departments, for which policy programs should provide a home.*
- *Overall, it is our impression that the faculty contributions overall to the world of public-policy-related scholarship is substantial. We would also note that the record of research activity also looks quite good if one includes the adjunct faculty and the numerous emeriti from the 2004-2009 period .*

Negative comments – and responses

- *The program has been strongly affected by the resource cutbacks at the university in recent years, as three faculty took early retirement. As it happened, two of the three were faculty who worked more on political and management issues, leaving this part of the program largely devoid of fulltime staff.*

The Dept. of Public Policy agrees that it is imperative that the department's full-time senior faculty be reinforced by three full-time slots to replace those lost to retirement. This is crucial for providing the teaching and research gravitas needed for enabling the department to realize its full academic and public policy potential. This request is being considered by the Rector.

- *We were encouraged to find that the students at Tel Aviv spontaneously refer to concepts such as benefit-cost analysis when asked to describe their training. We were not as impressed with their ability to apply that concept, or other ideas from the economist's toolkit, to the specific policy issues we raised with them. In summary, it appears that the Tel Aviv program is stimulating more intellectual ambition than it is able to satisfy. We did not emerge from our meetings with confidence that the students can deliver on the goal enunciated by some faculty members: to be able to go "toe-to-toe" with colleagues trained as economists in discussing quantitative problems.*

One has to distinguish between training received by individuals getting degrees in economics and those studying towards more general public policy degrees. Despite the emphasis given to economic studies in the Department and the relative importance attached to these studies compared to other public policy departments in Israel, the goal is to create economically literate graduates and not to replace full-blown economic degree programs that give economists a natural edge in "toe-to-toe" debates.

In any event, the students that the committee refers to were only first year students in the middle of their first semester of the program at the time of the committee's visit to TAU. The more technically demanding courses in economics begin in the second semester.

From debriefings that the department has had with students in their 3rd and 4th semesters of study, it turns out that this is the point where students finally appreciate the economic training that they receive and see the doors that open to them – both professionally and as also simple followers of current events

- *TAU has recently established an executive education program. We did not get the impression that faculty had thought very strategically about opportunities for synergies (course content, course sharing, curricular cross-fertilization) between executive education and the masters program, including ways executive education could be used to improve the professional focus of the masters program.*

The CHE forbids the use of public teaching resources for students in the private executive programs, though there are no restrictions in the other direction (e.g. students in the public program may utilize the executive program resources). The Department agrees with the Committee about the need for such "cross-fertilization." It has already opened up one executive course to regular students and will explore the possibility of doing this in additional courses.

General recommendations for entire field in Israel

(i.e. from overall report and not limited to just the Tel-Aviv Department of Public Policy)

General Recommendations – Curriculum

- *Our most-important recommendation is that these programs need to recognize that the primary goal of their teaching programs is to train professionals, and to adapt their curricula accordingly. Curricular content needs to be changed to focus on conveying concepts that will improve professional practice.*

The orientation of the Tel Aviv Public Policy Department is relatively more prescriptive than the other departments and focuses more on 'public policy.' Though it is not intended to be a strictly professional school – the liberal arts component is substantial – the Department agrees that a greater emphasis on a professional education is necessary. Towards this end, the Department is considering the following steps:

- Supplementing the teaching staff with adjunct faculty who are specialists in various practical aspects of public policy (e.g. past and present public administrators and specialists in negotiation techniques).
- Reorienting classes offered by regular faculty in a more professional direction. For instance, a new social policy class that will focus on direct and indirect evaluations of social program effectiveness.
- Encouraging students in the research master's program to publish their work as research reports.
 - *Authority to offer a research master's should be contingent on development of a program with a clear professional orientation. Where this orientation is not currently present, the research master's should be suspended until such an orientation has been developed.*

The committee has perceptively pointed out that the Department suffers from scarce resources. Given the limited time that faculty are able to dedicate to individual students in the course of a research seminar, most students find it difficult to fully develop their research skills: skills that would serve them well in future public sector jobs. That said, the Department feels that much, though not all, master's research work conducted under its auspices is high quality – often of an applied nature. A master's research degree is a valuable opportunity for a select few to develop research skills under direct faculty supervision. Most of these students are unlikely to pursue an academic career, but the research work trains them for a professional career.

The Department agrees that there is room for improvement in the dissemination of the research products to the policy community and will explore ways to do so. In addition, the Department will consider raising the bar for research applicants from a grade point average of 85 in their first year to a GPA of 90.

- *Within the next year, each public policy program with a PhD program should evaluate the performance of its program with respect, at a minimum, to the percentage of students who complete a dissertation within five years and whose dissertations lead to publication(s) in peer-reviewed journals, preferably international journals (or as books). Programs that are not reasonably successful by these criteria should be closed.*

As a general rule, these recommendations definitely have merit – for all PhD programs in all of Israel's research universities. As long as this is not the case and this rule is not implemented universally, then application of this recommendation selectively in particular areas of study while not doing so in others can lead to very problematic outcomes. As a general rule, almost all departments in Israel's research universities offer research tracks at the MA and PhD level (in this respect, they differ from American universities). Given this Israeli context, elimination of the research tracks in Public Policy may send the wrong message to the top candidates, who may mistakenly conclude that the Public Policy Department is not a top tier department compared with other programs offering research tracks. It should be mentioned that even the professional colleges in Israel have applied and received the permission from the Malag to offer research track MA theses.

With regard to MA research theses at Tel-Aviv University's Public Policy Department in particular:

- some of the theses have been awarded as best thesis of the year in the general category of social sciences (e.g. Frederique Kadosh won the CHE prize for best thesis of the year, and Michal Koreh won the prize of best paper published awarded by the Israeli association of welfare studies).
- graduates of the research track have been accepted to the best PhD research tracks in other institutions in Israel (Technion, Hebrew University).

As for Tel-Aviv University's Public Policy Department's PhD program, all four of the Department's PhD graduates have published academically and each one holds a teaching or tenured track position in public policy department at Israeli colleges.

Furthermore, other comments made in the committee's report suggest that the committee assumes that the university allocates special funds to the MA theses track and for the PhD programs – funds that would then be freed up for other uses by the Department should these programs be terminated. This underlying assumption is erroneous. There are no such funds and the elimination of these tracks will not free funds that could be transferred to the Department as the committee suggests.

General Recommendations – Teaching and learning

- *Curricular content needs to be changed to teach fewer concepts more intensively. Teaching practices and broader policies need to be changed in ways that elicit more student effort and engagement (such as through greater use of experiential learning and exercises/problem sets students prepare outside of class.)*

Tel-Aviv University's Public Policy Department has given the teaching methods considerable attention and is currently implementing most of the committee's general recommendations regarding teaching techniques and creative methods for raising students' attention and engaging them in current relevant policy problems and potential solutions. For instance, while recognizing the need to further tighten the connection between the dilemmas and challenges of public servants and academic research the 'environmental policy clinic' was established (as a joint initiative with the Porter School of Environmental Studies).

- *Programs should consider inclusion of an integrative group exercise giving students an opportunity to work on a concrete, difficult public policy problem that includes microeconomic, quantitative, political, and management dimensions.*

The Department agrees with this recommendation. One way to accomplish this is by changing the requirements for students in the non-thesis track. Instead of two seminars, they will be required to complete one seminar and one team assignment that will be offered in the framework of the elective courses.

- *All public policy programs should require a course on negotiations, emphasizing both its theoretical aspects and professional applications and taught with a significant experiential component.*

The Department agrees with this recommendation to offer a course in negotiation.

- *To extend available teaching resources, programs should consider outsourcing some teaching activities, such as through greater cross-registration in other departments or various versions of on-line and distance learning.*

The Department agrees with this recommendation and is implementing it.

Research and Promotions – General Comments

The structure of universities and their reward systems make it difficult and unrewarding to do public policy research. Public policy research requires skills and knowledge that are not easily obtained in traditional disciplines

We stated at the beginning of this General Report that Israel needs more and better public policy research. ... The most effective way to increase public policy research is to make it easier for current public policy faculty to do it.

Having a promotion system that recognized serious policy analysis as research would help. So would providing resources to faculty who do not participate in PhD programs. In principle this is easy to do: simply set aside funds for which certain kinds of faculty can apply. Many U.S. universities have special funds to support the research of faculty who are in disciplines for which outside research support is not available. Savings from eliminating PhD programs and research master's activities should free up resources to support research by faculty.

Since public policy programs are professional schools, promotion criteria for faculty at the research-oriented programs (all the ones we evaluated except for Sapir) should be somewhat different than in most other social science faculties. Publication of traditional scholarly research in traditional research outlets should of course be an important factor in promotion; an acceptable minimum research quality and productivity output should serve as a constraint.

However, we believe that faculties should also consider as one criterion for promotion decisions the production of high-quality policy reports, produced either independently, or for a governmental or other client. ... Such reports would involve serious intellectual work, informed by disciplines relevant to policy formulation, adoption, and implementation, and reflect relevant empirical social science research as well. However, often they would not make a theoretical or empirical contribution allowing publication of the results in a highly ranked scholarly journal.

These are just a few of the passages emphasizing how strongly the committee feels about the research contributions and promotion considerations that need to apply to public policy departments. The Department of Public Policy at Tel-Aviv University agrees with the committee.

In an overall public atmosphere in which nearly all data and positions being debated publicly come from groups or individuals with agendas, the Department members are in the unique position of being viewed as unbiased professionals – by both policy-makers and the public at large – who can be relied upon to provide state-of-the art analyses on major policy issues. While the public benefit of such involvement could be very large, as noted by the committee, current promotion practices at the university provide just the opposite incentive, making such public policy initiatives by Department members tantamount to academic suicide.

Research and Promotions – General Recommendations

- *Funds should be set aside specifically for supporting public policy research. Prescriptive and evaluative policy analyses by faculty should count as research products for purposes of promotion. This will require developing a peer-review process for such analyses .*

The Department of Public Policy at Tel-Aviv University strongly agrees with the committee that a way must be found by the universities promotion committees that take into

consideration the Department's unique circumstances and its considerable potential for increasing Tel-Aviv University's positive impact on Israeli society. This can be done by enabling the promotion procedure to combine the very important requirement of academic excellence with the other important element of public impact.

Tel Aviv University – Specific Recommendations

- *It is an advantage to the program that the tenure/tenure-track faculty is mostly fulltime in the department, rather than mostly having joint appointments; a fulltime faculty generally finds it easier to develop a distinctive culture and ethos. This advantage is reflected in cordial relationships among faculty members at Tel Aviv and their practice of discussing curricular issues such as coordination among courses.*

As noted above in response to the general report by the committee, the Department of Public Policy strongly agrees with this recommendation that it is highly preferable that its members be full-time in the Department rather than part-time – with concurrent positions in other TAU departments – and asks the university to adopt it when future positions will be discussed.

- *This program, more than any of the others we examined, had a “policy analysis” (microeconomics and quantitative reasoning) focus. This is a reasonable strategic choice. However, a full-blown public policy program of the sort discussed in the general report should include at least some coverage of management and politics material: again, from a prescriptive and evaluative standpoint, rather than a merely descriptive one. ... The next faculty hire needs to be someone from public management rather than economics. ... There should be at least some material on management and/or politics in the curriculum. This suggests that the highest recruitment priority should be for a full-time faculty member with a background in management/organizational behavior or politics.*

The Department of Public Policy agrees with this recommendation, feels that an individual in this field would be a very important addition and would fill what is currently a large research and teaching void.