



November 11, 2012

## The response of the Department of Geography to the evaluation report of the international review committee nominated by the Council for Higher Education

פרופ' נועם שובל  
המחלקה לגאוגרפיה  
הפקולטה  
למדעי החברה  
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Before responding to the comments and suggestions made in the evaluation report we would first like to thank the committee members for their comprehensive report and the efforts invested in compiling the assessment as well as their understanding and recommendations detailed in the report. Second, we are proud that the distinguished committee chose to describe our Department as "*a leading research department, not just in Israel but in a global context*".

After receiving and reading the report, the faculty members met to discuss its results and recommendations. Below we relate to the department-level recommendations made by the committee:

- 1. *Make immediate efforts to improve the gender diversity of the Department.***  
We fully agree with this recommendation. Over the last two years the department tried to promote two female candidates to tenure-track positions. Unfortunately, they failed to receive the support of the Faculty of Social Sciences. The department controls the candidates it submits to the Faculty of Social Science Development Committee, but obviously not the outcome of its decisions. This process is related to one of the committee's recommendations at the university-level with respect to "*reconsider the current approach to new faculty hiring*". Changing the hiring model is likely to assist the department in achieving the goal of improving gender diversity. However, despite the shortcomings of the current faculty hiring process the committee emphasized that "*It is also worth noting that recent appointments have been excellent, and they continue to reinforce the quality of the department nationally and internationally*".
- 2. *Develop and implement a structured curriculum at the BA level. (a) The existing program appears to be "one big introduction to everything," with too little progression in depth from the 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> years. (b) Ensure that redundancies are eliminated, progression is clear, and student learning outcomes map onto required and elective courses.*** We divide this recommendation into two parts. We accept the second section and agree that there are a large number of courses in years 2-3 of the BA, that the courses are

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generally limited in their scope and that the number of courses that each faculty member teaches, could together cause potential overlap. This is a perennial issue on the agenda of the departmental teaching committee. We concur however that the issue needs more coherent thinking since it is true that some redundancy still persists in the BA curriculum. This is an area in which we can improve and generate a tighter, more structured body of content ensuring that the suite of courses offered is indeed a coherent curriculum.

However we take issue with the first part of the recommendation that there is little flow or progression across the curriculum. We feel that this conclusion is probably the result of a misunderstanding arising from the format of appendix 6.1 and the fact that appendix 6.5 appears only in Hebrew (both appear as instructed by the CHE). **The department completely restructured its BA curriculum during 2007-2010 in a process lasting three years in order to ensure a progressive and serial development across years 1-3.** During their first year, students study seven introductory courses in the main areas of Geography. In the second year they are introduced to methods and skills through course such as research approaches, statistics and GIS. At this juncture they also choose between three thematic clusters. Within each cluster they are free to chose several elective courses during their second and third years and to take an obligatory pro-seminar in the second year as preparation for a research topic in the third year. The latter is a two semester independent research experience and forms the pinnacle of their academic achievement in the department.

3. *Recruit majors from the pool of students who transfer among fields at HUJI. Given the unfortunate state of geographic education in Israeli state schools, the Department needs to exploit the idea of transfer students as a mechanism to stabilize and maintain enrolments. It can be built upon the favourable trends already in place in the Department.* As the committee mentioned, there is already a trend at the undergraduate level of students who transfer to geography after their first or second semester. We plan to continue to make geography an attractive option for students that are already enrolled to the Hebrew University or for potential candidates. At the graduate level we are highly successful in attracting students that graduate from other departments within Hebrew University or from other universities. About 50% of our graduate students come from outside the department. As a result of this attractiveness, this coming academic year we have for the first time ever more than 50 new MA students.
4. *Establish a systematic process to track progress of students and graduates. Such data are important metrics of successes and areas for improvement and provide the opportunity to make mid-course corrections when necessary.* We find this as a very constructive idea. However given the current budgetary climate this is a task that will be hard to undertake. This function was in the past ostensibly undertaken at the university level and a specific university alumni office was charged with tracking university graduates. Recently this function was delegated to the department. As a result, last year

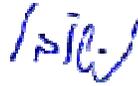
we inaugurated a departmental alumni association that will be having its second annual meeting in November. Additionally, we have explored various opportunities for strengthening ties with graduates and alumni and leveraging these connections for the welfare of the department. This has resulted in some departmental specific contributions and strengthening ties with those business and government communities where our alumni are prominent.

5. ***Ensure that there are substantive research experiences in the non-thesis MA program. The non-thesis option now constitutes 85% of MA degrees, and considerable attention must be directed to ensure that students gain genuine research experiences in either basic research or practice in the case of the Urban and Regional Planning Program.*** We feel there is some misunderstanding with respect to this recommendation. First, the correct ratio 75% non-thesis track and 25% thesis track. Second, the so called ‘non-research’ track still contains a sizeable research component. Students are required to take several research-based courses and at least two research seminars where they engage in small scale independent research projects. This is true in both the Urban and Regional Planning Program and the Environmental Management Policy and Planning Program. Third, the vast majority of the non-thesis track students are in the Urban and Regional Planning Program where they have to undertake an additional (third) research seminar with a planning orientation. Fourth, the physical and historical geography specializations offer a thesis-based (research) MA only. Finally, the essence of the non-thesis MA program is application and praxis. We offer this while consciously giving students some independent research experience. As a result even our non-thesis track is not devoid of research content.
  
6. ***Upgrade the PhD program to achieve the scientific synthesis described in its mission statement and self-evaluation document. This infrastructure may include office or other gathering space for graduate students, coursework organized around problem solving rather than knowledge acquisition, support for published articles and grant submission, workshops that require a high level of interaction among participants, department-wide poster sessions, participation in departmental search committees, facilitation of visits by outside experts and speakers, reverse post-doctoral fellowships bringing excellent scholars and their students to campus for a month, and group participation in international conferences.*** The Social Science Faculty has in fact invested considerable efforts over the last few years in developing a PhD ‘community’ and ‘culture’ that crosses departmental turfs. A senior faculty member serves as the facilitator of this initiative but all the specific activities have been conducted bottom up. These include workshops on topics such as writing grant proposals, getting published and presenting at conferences. Additionally small groups of PhD's have organized their own mini-seminars of topics of common interest such as data mining. At the department level, while the Israeli tradition, as noted in the report, is one of intense collaboration between research student and supervisor we have endeavored to generate a PhD community identity. We recently instituted a workshop for PhD students and have dedicated workspaces for seven

different research clusters that solely comprise graduate and PhD students. These research groups actively encourage and fund PhD attendance at technical workshops, conferences, etc.

7. ***Given the paucity of academic jobs in Israeli universities, the University should consider the possibility that PhD graduates will use their research skills outside the academy in government and the private sector. PhD programs should include the practice of disciplines as well as the production of new knowledge for them. At the very least, the current cohort of PhD students should not be led to believe that most of them will obtain faculty positions in Israeli universities. This is an option reserved for the top 10% of PhD students.*** We inform our PhD students about the current situation in Israeli universities and they are well aware of their options in the Israeli job market and unfortunately also in the academic world outside Israel as well.

Sincerely,



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Head, Department of Geography



## Response to the Evaluation Committee's report on the Environmental field

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At the time of the committee's visit to HU the Advanced School for Environmental Studies was in the planning stage. Hence, the committee reviewed only the proposal for the school. Thus, while they commend the ideas that are expressed in the proposal they stated that it is too early to review the school. We concur with this suggestion. Given the rudimentary stage at which the school was at the time, they suggested that it may be advisable to postpone the opening of the school to 2013. They also suggested that we should review other interdisciplinary programs, and expressed worry about the lack of positions in the school in its first years. In this response we relate to these points.

The Advanced School for Environmental Studies is a bold and innovative structure at HU. It is a supra-faculty school, which does not replace any of the faculties. Rather, it strives to widen the scope of studies in faculty-based programs by providing a compulsory common core to all programs. This requires many administrative adjustments, including the inter-linking of all campuses with video-conferencing facilities. Hence, it was decided to open the school already in the Fall of 2012 in a preliminary mode by introducing common courses in the existing programs, in order to put in place and test the coordinative administrative and technical infrastructure that is needed for the school to succeed. This has been accomplished in the past few months since the committee's visit.

One of the pre-requisites for cross-campus courses is a video-conferencing system. This has been put in place. At present the first video-conferencing course is being taught, allowing students in Jerusalem and Rehovoth to take it concurrently. Other trans-program trans-campus courses are being re-adjusted in preparation for the second semester. It is important to note that the programs to which the courses are offered have been in existence already for a many years. Thus, by offering these courses we allow the students already registered to established MA programs to take advantage of the additional opportunities opened by the cross-program cross-campus courses now offered. As was expected many obstacles had to be overcome in the past few months. This trial-run has already allowed us to identify and avoid pitfalls that otherwise would have become apparent only in 2013. This trial run was thus deemed critical in order to bring the school to a fully operational level in October 2013, which is the time the committee suggested as appropriate to open the (fully functioning) school. The main impediment to fulfilling the goal of a fully operational school by October 2013 is the need for the Malag's approval to extending the existing specialization in the Social Science faculty to a full master program. Thus, it is imperative that the Malag will give priority to

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this change, which is a minor change as all the compulsory courses that will be part of the new program are already provided as part of the current programs.

The committee is worried by the lack of positions within this school. This is indeed a major concern. This concern was raised when the program was discussed within the university, and the standing committee of the senate decided that the university will discuss such positions in in two years' time.

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Finally, we have commenced on a review of other trans-disciplinary programs in North America and Western Europe. On the basis of this review two basic models for such programs have been identified. The first focuses on inter-disciplinary courses and on the inter-relations between disciplines. Such programs generally tend to offer wide-ranging courses in the early stages of studies, specializing over time. The second model involves multi-disciplinary programs, whereby students are first required to obtain a firm disciplinary basis. These students are then taught how to tackle wide-ranging problems on the basis of their disciplinary background. These programs strive to teach specialists with very strong disciplinary foundations how to work in tandem with other specialists, by providing them the basis needed for cross-disciplinary understanding, without compromising disciplinary rigor. This is the direction chosen by the Hebrew University in the formation of the new school.

We thank the members of the Gober committee for their assessments of the new program. We are happy to answer any further questions you have.

Sincerely,

Eran Feitelson

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