

Bar Ilan University

The Department of Psychology at Bar Ilan University is to be commended for the direct and thoughtful responses to the 2009 recommendations and suggestions of the committee appointed by the Council for Higher Education to evaluate the department, and for the actions taken to implement these recommendations. It is evident that they took the task of implementation in the spirit in which it was offered, as a sincere attempt to support and improve the department, and their openness to continued improvement and innovation is notable. It was heartening to see that most of the committee's recommendations have been addressed by concrete changes or by concerted deliberation about and plans for such changes. We recognize as well that a number of the committee's recommendations require resources or regulatory clarifications beyond the department's control.

1. Modernizing graduate-level research training

The committee recommended that the department re-think its graduate training throughout the department to establish cutting edge research training in each, especially by formulating and building strong training programs at the core of the discipline (i.e., in cognition, perception, and neuroscience, and in social psychology, respectively). The committee noted that while relevant advances had been made in the clinical programs along these lines, more was needed in these programs as well. The department indicates that major changes have been made in PhD-level training by exposing students to advanced research methods and advanced statistical techniques. Emphasis is now placed on research skills, scientific writing, grant proposals, article reviews, and presentation skills. Coursework in neuroscience, social psychology, and developmental psychology is required. In terms of the clinical programs, PhD students are now doing internships in clinical and rehabilitation psychology at the clinic while working on their dissertations in the department. The clinic also provides for conferences in which experts from abroad share their research and treatment innovations. The department aims to create a special clinical program for training researcher-clinicians for which PhD students are recruited from the top ranks of the clinical MA tracks, and then pursue internship and dissertation research within the clinic; a proposal to this effect has been submitted to the university.

2. The experimental program

The committee indicated that the experimental program seemed ill-defined, being coherently organized neither in cognition and perception nor in cognitive neuroscience. The committee recommended that the department re-conceive and re-build this program, and more aptly name it to capture program content (e.g., cognitive neuroscience), and make at least two faculty hires to begin to establish a presence in this crucial area that is core to the discipline. The committee also recognized that two additional faculty (beyond the two recommended) will also be needed in the future to establish programmatic excellence. The department indicates that this program is now called the cognitive and affective neuroscience program and has been reorganized to focus on cognition and cognitive neuroscience. Two new faculty have been hired (one for rehabilitation and one for experimental). The new director of the Brain Research Center (which is next door) has also agreed to reinforce the program and now acts as a thesis advisor for some students.

The department is now searching for an additional faculty member as well and hopes that funding will be forthcoming for this position.

3. The social-organizational program

The committee recommended that the department use upcoming retirements in social-organizational psychology as an opportunity to develop a first-rate program in experimental social psychology (focused for example on social cognition, prejudice, intergroup bias, or social neuroscience), and to phase out the less research-oriented emphasis on organizational development. The recommendation was that plans for such a program be formulated and that at least two faculty hires be made, even though two additional faculty beyond these will be needed in the future to fully establish programmatic excellence. The department indicates that 3 such faculty hires have been made (one part-time) with research foci ranging from individual differences in social behavior, social cognition and psychological distance to social support and intergroup relations. Yet another faculty hire was also made in the area of leadership with the aim strengthening the area for which this program was previously known. The research expertise of these new faculty is reflected both in the undergraduate and graduate program curriculum. Further, graduate training is now done by senior faculty rather than by adjunct faculty. The department indicates as well that implementing these recommendations has created a challenge in establishing suitable lab space for new faculty and obtaining competitive start-up funds needed for faculty recruitment in psychological science, matters that remain to be resolved.

In terms of the latter, see our point #15 (below).

4. Clinical programs – Clinical science and empirically supported treatments

The committee recommended that the clinical programs be brought up to international standards by several means, including by reducing the number of courses in each of the main areas (psychopathology, assessment, and intervention), emphasizing clinical science and evidence-based practice in course content, requiring at least one course in cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), making an effort to ensure that adjuncts hired reflect the mission of the program, and doing whatever possible to arrange that students have the option of doing their practicum at a site offering evidence-based practice training (e.g., CBT). The department indicates that considerable progress has been made in implementing these recommendations and that given the new guidelines to be issued by the Ministry of Health (with extensive discussions with the CHE and faculty from the universities), the department is confident its efforts will not result lead its students to be penalized later.

5. Hiring a new clinical faculty member, a top researcher, to head the clinic

The committee recommended that the department hire a senior scientist (tenure-track) to head the clinic who specializes in evidence-based practice, and also replace retiring faculty with clinical scientists. The department indicates that 3 new research-oriented clinical faculty have in fact been hired, and at least one of these new faculty members is serving as co-director the clinic. Moreover, the clinic now offers supervision in a variety of evidence-based treatments (of differing theoretical orientations), including CBT, cognitive therapy, schema-focused therapy, and short-term psychodynamic therapy.

6. Conducting research in the in-house clinic

The committee recommended that the clinic implement its plan to make the clinic more research-based, further developing science-based assessment and also treatments based on the research. The department indicates that training in the in-house clinic has been upgraded, as noted above (see #5 above), and that all treatment protocols are also accompanied by empirical evaluation measures. Indeed, a full-time post-doctoral research fellow has been hired to coordinate research activities within the clinic, supervised by (and collaborating with) the 3 faculty members who co-direct the clinic. A faculty committee has also been established to initiate and oversee all additional research projects in the clinic, and there are about 10 PhD and MA projects ongoing in the clinic now. In addition, a specialty clinic for young children has recently been established, headed by a top-notch researcher in developmental, to provide training, research, and treatment in child-clinical. Finally, research at the clinic has been dependent on the university extending the clinic's budget (e.g., for hiring the full-time post-doc) and maintaining this funding is crucial.

7. Unifying initial stages of the 3 clinical tracks

The committee recommended that the 3 tracks of the clinical program be unified at initial stages to include a common core to foster an integrated view of clinical science as well as specialization by track. The department indicates that a joint CBT course in the curriculum of all clinical tracks. The ultimate aim is to have all students complete the same curriculum in the first year, and to then begin to specialize subsequently . To facilitate interchange across programs, a wide variety of electives are also available to students in all tracks.

8. Faculty student ratio

The committee noted that across all graduate programs the faculty-student ratio was far too high for effective training, and it thus recommended that the department reduce MA enrollment from 193 to 120 and PhD enrollment from 170 to 100, with a maximum of 6 doctoral students per advisor (across all years) and a total number of graduate students supervised by each advisor (MA and PhD combined) not exceeding 8. The department indicates that the ratio is now lower than it was in 2007 and that steps have been taken to reduce the number of incoming PhD students by half, from about 30 to 15. No comment was made about reduced numbers of MA students.

9. Admitting PhD students based on student-mentor fit

The committee suggests that the department establish a procedure for admitting PhD students that emphasizes not only grades and psychometric scores, but also research experience and fit with the research interests of one or more faculty in the program. The department indicates that most students now admitted to the PhD programs have existing mentors and that only 5 were admitted without a mentor. Indeed, MA students admitted to the 3 clinical programs complete additional application materials and screening and interviewing procedures that ask about research experience and interests. All accepted MA students also undergo an interview with a research-active mentor.

10. Undergraduate program

The committee recommended that courses in the undergraduate curriculum be upgraded to reflect the expertise of newly hired faculty in cognition and cognitive neuroscience, and also in social psychology. The department indicates having focused more on faculty hiring and improving graduate programs than on the undergraduate program thus far, but that newly hired faculty are now teaching undergraduate courses. The plan now is to convene a curriculum committee to make curricular changes to the BA program.

11. Transparency in promotion and tenure procedures

The committee suggested that ambiguity about the promotion and tenure process be reduced, transparency increased, and clear time-frame expectations for promotion provided to faculty. It was suggested as well that a periodic evaluation of tenure-track faculty be instituted (e.g., every 2-3 years) that includes a written evaluation and specific criteria to be met for promotion. The department indicates that the chair has clarified such procedures in department meetings and that the faculty promotions committee has begun discussing candidates' files and formally encouraging candidates to attend these meetings to discuss their files. The department plans to refine these procedures in the coming year.

12. Infrastructure

The committee recommended that the university significantly upgrade IT at the library to increase the number of e-journals available to faculty and students and to keep these e-journals up to date, and not, for example, a year behind. The department indicates that access to e-journals at the university has been improved, not least by the recent purchase of EBSCO to better enable searching for journal articles online, which has increased access considerably. Nonetheless, library resources that are also critical still await funding from the university, i.e., for APA Psychtests, Psychotherapy, Books, and Handbooks. Beyond this, the department notes that syllabi, exercises, and articles required for courses are now routinely available online, and registration is now done online as well.

13-14. Alumni

The committee recommended that the department reach out to its alumni by conducting an alumni survey, forming an alumni group, and circulating a regular newsletter, which may eventually assist with finances (fundraising). The department indicates that the faculty have discussed this and organized workshops/conferences to establish alumni contacts. Further efforts to set up an alumni data base, however, require funding. The vice-rector has thus made such a request to university public relations and awaits a response.

15. Additional Note: A General-Report Recommendation

Although the committee's report for this department did not specify it, it is worth noting that the general report evaluating psychology at universities in Israel recommended that psychology at universities be treated as a life science – in terms of teaching loads, undergraduate and graduate support, laboratory space and facilities, and the like. Given that relevant funding (and other) challenges are noted in the department's implementation report, this recommendation from the committee's general report seems worth highlighting.