

The Open University

The Psychology Department of the Open University is to be commended for the frank, direct, and thoughtful responses and clear organization of their report on implementing the 2009 recommendations and suggestions of the committee appointed by the Council for Higher Education to evaluate the department. It is evident that they took on the task of implementation in the spirit in which it was offered, as a sincere attempt to support and improve a thriving program. On the whole, it was heartening to see that the majority of the committee's recommendations have been addressed by concrete changes or by serious planning for concrete changes. We also recognize that many of the recommendations required resources that the department cannot produce on its own.

1. The Department needs more senior faculty to cope with the large number of students and to establish a critical mass for collegial interactions among faculty and students, given that this is the Open University. Such interactions might include the department being able to offer regular research colloquia and the like. Further hiring would improve BA-level education, enhance the intellectual life of the department while fostering more research collaborations among faculty, and increase research productivity and morale as well. Hence, the committee strongly recommends that the Open University administration consider the need for additional faculty in this highly successful department and take the actions needed to make expansion possible. Hires that build on existing strengths in the department, i.e., in cognitive psychology and social psychology, would be particularly valuable.

The department has added four new senior faculty members, two in cognitive and two in social psychology, going beyond the committee's recommendations. At the same time, one faculty member left, resulting in a net gain of 3 faculty members.

2. Faculty and research coordinators need more research resources. The excellent, state-of-the-science laboratory for the department on campus is a positive development. It clearly facilitates faculty research excellence and productivity, and has enabled collaborations. The committee recommends that increased attention be given to finding other ways to facilitate research involvement among faculty as well and to implement proactive changes that accomplish this. One change might be to provide support for BA level research assistants; this would greatly benefit those students winning such fellowships in the special research opportunities that would then become available to them and would clearly benefit faculty research. Another might be to institutionalize the informal collaborations between Open University faculty and faculty and graduate students in other universities. A third might be to simply increase funding for on-campus research among faculty and for research sabbaticals abroad. A fourth might be to provide resources for regular colloquia in the department, an important move for enabling faculty to keep up with the research that is ongoing in the department (and elsewhere) and for expanding the research understanding of the select undergraduates who are most engaged in research. The latter would be still more essential if planned MA programs are implemented.

Many positive steps have been taken to facilitate research activities. A forward-looking and challenging undergraduate major in Cognitive Science has been implemented, with a track

that provides scholarships for outstanding students to do research with faculty. An MA program in social psychology that will involve advanced students in faculty research is about to be launched. Most OUI faculty have extensive research collaborations with faculty in other departments in Israel as well as abroad, and jointly supervise MA, PhD, and even post-doctoral students in other universities in Israel. New faculty members are provided with start-up funds to launch their research.

3. Regarding course coordinators and tutors, the committee recommends that the administration continue monitoring and improving the issues of morale, retention, productivity, and promotion. Many course coordinators have Ph.D.s or are working toward them, and need time and opportunity to advance, primarily to do research and publish, as they also aspire to regular academic jobs. Creating more secure and stable jobs (longer contracts) is challenging, given the unpredictability of income based on course enrollments at the Open University (rather than semester enrollments as in the universities and colleges). Course coordinators praised the opportunities they have for taking research sabbaticals and obtaining travel grants but would greatly prefer more Level 4 positions, a status that could provide a career path for many and would provide stability and continuity for the university.

The department has taken positive steps to improve the work conditions for coordinators and tutors. Tutors are now hired for six-month terms that can be renewed, independent of enrollment figures. Several Level 4 course coordinator positions were added; these appointments come with research funds equivalent to those of Lecturers. These trends should be continued.

4. The committee recommends that a face-to-face meeting of senior faculty, course coordinators and tutors is held at least once a year (and ideally once a semester). Such a meeting would serve to foster further communication, coordination, and collaboration between levels.

The department has decided to organize yearly meetings of all faculty, course coordinators, and tutors on a yearly basis. Senior faculty members meet regularly with their course coordinators as they are in the same building. They also try to meet each course team, coordinators and tutors, once a year, though this is a challenge due to the large number of courses senior faculty oversee.

5. The committee recommends a careful examination of the curriculum to ensure that courses taken become increasingly sophisticated, and that advanced, specialized courses build on earlier overview courses. The committee also recommends, consistent with faculty and student preferences, that reading materials in English, especially original articles, are included at every stage of the curriculum, rather than only in the most advanced stages. This would enable students to gain expertise in the language of science earlier in their education, getting a head start in learning research-oriented thinking, making third level courses less taxing and more valuable.

Traditionally, OUI courses have been based on specially-written textbooks in Hebrew. In accordance with the 2009 recommendations, the department has added readings in English to intermediate courses. In one elective course, English readings are accompanied

by a student guide; there is a similar plan for another course.

Given that the psychology departments of the other major universities in Israel rely far more on English texts and readings, the department should increase reliance on English to insure that their students are part of the international community of psychologists and that their students are competent and competitive for graduate programs.

6. Much time is taken up among faculty, course coordinators, and tutors with providing extra attention to struggling students who have less preparation – and this is likely to decrease the attention that is given to the more talented students at the university. The committee thus suggests that the faculty work to innovate ways of solving this problem, perhaps by taking advantage of advanced students as mentors, compensating them with tuition relief or some other form of compensation.

The department is finding creative ways to both utilize the talents of gifted students and at the same time, to help struggling ones. A tutoring program was aimed at both, paying outstanding students to tutor those needing it. Although tutors and tutees were satisfied, the consequences in performance were mixed. The Cognitive Science program has a challenging research program for outstanding students. Finally, the department has a two-course advanced research seminar for a selected group of 20 students, most of whom continue to MA programs.

7. The committee encourages the University to continue to pursue its plan to establish an honor's program for outstanding students. This would greatly enhance undergraduate education and increase still more the number of Open University graduates prepared to continue their education by getting an advanced degree in psychology.

The Department participates in a new interdisciplinary Cognitive Science honors program that entails supervised student research. The advanced program described in 6 above sounds very much like an honors program, and perhaps should be conducted as one.

8. In addition, the committee recommends that the university's alumni survey be conducted more systematically so that most students graduating with a major in psychology are accounted for and their data are included in reports of outcome. The aim is to formally assess what students do with their education (in terms of job placement or subsequent education). The currently reported survey has too much missing data to estimate the number of graduates who apply for advanced studies.

The department is planning a second survey of alumni.

9. Finally, the committee suggests that the department and the administration establish ongoing contacts with alumni, keeping track of students. The aim should be to involve graduates in the Open University both by a newsletter and by forming communities of graduates organized by discipline or current employment or geographic region (as examples). Alumni groups often provide financial support to their alma maters, making it very much in the university's interest to establish ongoing alumni contacts.

The University has an active Alumni Association. However, other departments have found benefits from forming a *departmental* alumni association, with a regular (once or twice a

year) e-newsletter that highlights faculty research, student and graduate accomplishments, and other departmental news. The newsletters also foster networking among graduates and current students, creating a larger community that among other things, helps in finding employment and helps in other shared concerns. Some departments are enjoying involving graduates in department activities, such as advising and guiding students in their careers.