

The institution's implementation of the evaluation committees' recommendations

General observation:

This part should include your review on the effect of the process on the quality of the evaluated field in the higher education system Israel.

The departments and programs of Hebrew Language at the five evaluated Israeli universities are among the leading world institutions in the field. The quality of research and publications of their staff members is well recognized, and the programs offer rich and diversified syllabus, with different centres of excellence and specialization across the different universities. In addition to the purely academic standing of these departments, one must stress their role in promoting the Hebrew language also at the national and international level. Most of these evaluated departments understand their work as a mission, both in promoting higher cultural standards and respect for Knowledge in Israeli society as a whole, and, in particular at Haifa University and Ben-Gurion University in the Negev, in promoting Hebrew language and culture among native Arabic speaking citizens.

Despite their quality and importance within and beyond Academia, the departments of Hebrew language and associated languages (Jewish languages, Semitics, etc.), like other humanities departments, have suffered over the past decade from declining interest among prospective students but also, in some cases, from budgetary restrictions inflicted by the universities themselves.

It seems that the evaluation process we have undertaken has been helpful to a certain degree. First of all, with very few exceptions to which we shall return, the authorities of the universities concerned showed interest and awareness of the special role of the Hebrew language units. It is the case that the evaluation has helped the departments to clarify their needs, set their priorities and put forward their assets, and also to create a forum of discussion with the relevant university authorities. The system based on interviews and feedback between the Evaluation Committee and all the individuals and administrative levels concerned has proved very helpful, and has allowed for a better understanding of the distinctive situation of each component during a constructive exchange of ideas. In most cases, and despite the broader tendency to reduce expenditure across the Humanities, our recommendations concerning the replacement of staff members upon retirement, and also those calling for creation of new positions in the departments, were implemented. Overall, the evaluated Hebrew language units have clearly benefitted from support from the authorities of their universities. DHL at BGU is in a less comfortable situation than the other departments. The Faculty of Humanities is undergoing restructuring including merging smaller units into large departments, and the administrative status of the HLD is under discussion.

Pending a solution, the renewal of the positions left vacant by retiring staff members is not sufficiently implemented.

It seems that our recommendations have suggested some new developments in the departments. The recommendations concerning the creation of research centres have for instance started to be implemented at BIU and Haifa University, often as result of individual initiatives of the staff members. It seems also that the departments found it useful when the Evaluation committee identified teaching fields which were less well represented in their otherwise rich programmes.

One of the concerns of the Evaluation Committee was the decreasing number of students in some of the departments. While this decrease reflected a general tendency across the humanities, it was more glaring at some departments (e.g. HUC) while it did not affect some others at all (e.g. TAU, BGU). The Evaluation Committee strove to identify the reasons for the students decrease or dropping numbers, while being conscious that different departments have different histories and attract different populations of students, and that there is no universal remedy for the decrease in students' numbers. It was evident that departments that opened new specialized Master degrees (for instance, Edition at TAU, BGU, or paedagogical training, for instance at Haifa University or HUC) attracted additional students, without compromising the quality of the intake.

Alongside various factors which often remain beyond the control of the universities and departments, one constant factor discouraging students or leading to the abandon of their studies in Hebrew language programmes has proved to be the compulsory test in Hebrew grammar and vocalization (Niqqud). It has become clear that first year students do not have sufficient background in Hebrew grammar, which should have been acquired in secondary schools. This is why a number of our recommendations have concerned setting and encouraging tutorials and small groups teaching in this basic but essential field. Such additional tutorials imply either additional funding or the redistribution of resources, and the departments were rarely successful in obtaining specific funding. Nonetheless, some departments have started to implement this recommendation through internal reorganization, employment of post-doctoral researchers or looking for innovative teaching methods. In any case, the necessity to find a stable solution for the teaching of Niqqud – an integral part of Hebrew language acquisition and use - remains one of the priorities.

To conclude, the academic programmes of Hebrew language in Israel should be protected and encouraged, because they represent an invaluable asset to their universities and to society at large.