



EVALUATION OF COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS

ARIEL UNIVERSITY

COMMITTEE FOR THE EVALUATION OF COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS IN ISRAEL

July 2022

Section 1: Background and Procedures

1.1 In the academic year 2021-2022, the Council for Higher Education [CHE] put in place arrangements for the evaluation of study programs in the field of Communication in Israel.

1.2 The Higher Education Institutions [HEIs] participating in the evaluation process were:

- Ariel University
- College of Management
- Emek Yezre'el Academic College
- Hadassah Academic College
- The Hebrew University
- Kinneret Academic College
- Netanya Academic College
- Reichman University
- Sapir Academic College
- Tel Aviv University

1.3 To undertake the evaluation, the Vice-Chair of the CHE appointed an International Quality Assurance Review Committee [‘the evaluation committee’], under the auspices of the CHE’s Committee for the Evaluation of Communication in Israel¹, consisting of:

- **Prof. Patricia Moy** – Department of Communication, University of Washington, USA; *Committee Chair*
- **Prof. Andrea Hickerson** – College of Information and Communications, University of South Carolina, USA
- **Prof. María Len-Ríos** – Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Georgia, USA
- **Prof. Richard Ling** – School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
- **Prof. Karen Ross** – School of Arts and Cultures, Newcastle University, UK
- **Prof. Gabriel Weimann** – Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy & Strategy, Reichman University, Israel

Ms. Anat Haina served as the Coordinator of the Committee on behalf of the CHE.

¹ The committee’s letter of appointment is attached as **Appendix 1**.

1.4 The evaluation process was conducted in accordance with the CHE's Guidelines for Self-Evaluation (January 2020). Within this framework the evaluation committee was required to:

- examine the self-evaluation reports submitted by the institutions that provide study programs in Communication;
- conduct on-site visits at those institutions participating in the evaluation process (the visit to Ariel University was conducted on 03.04.2022);
- submit to the CHE an individual report on each of the academic units and study programs participating in the evaluation;
- set out the committee's findings and recommendations for each study program; and
- submit to the CHE a general report regarding the evaluated field of study within the Israeli system of higher education, including recommendations for standards in the evaluated field of study.

1.5 The evaluation committee examined only the evidence provided by each participating institution and considered it alongside the distinctive mission set out by each institution in terms of its own aims and objectives. This material was further elaborated and explained in discussions with senior management, faculty members, students, and alumni during the course of each one-day visit to each of the institutions.

1.6 In undertaking this work, the evaluation committee considered matters of both quality assurance and quality enhancement. It applied its collective knowledge of developments and good practices in the delivery of higher education in communication (mainly from European countries and from the USA) to the evaluation of such provision in Israel.

1.7 This report deals with the School of Communication at Ariel University. The institution was evaluated by Prof. María Len-Ríos, Prof. Richard Ling, and Prof. Gabriel Weimann.

The EC would like to thank the management of the School of Communication for its self-evaluation report, supportive interactions with the evaluation committee in the course of the evaluation process, and hospitality towards the committee members who visited the institution.

Section 2: Executive Summary

This report is based on an examination of the self-evaluation report prepared by the School, and the site visit carried out by the evaluation committee on 3 April 2022. During that visit, the evaluation committee met with the university leadership, the head of the School, full-time and adjunct faculty, BA students, and alumni. The team also was given a tour of the campus.

The committee found that there has been a recent move towards emphasizing research at the School of Communication. There is an ethos of doing research and producing publications in international quality journals. There are also efforts to increase the diversity of students in the School, though these efforts could benefit from developing a strategic plan for diversity. The faculty were satisfied with the School, but they suffer from having a heavy teaching and administrative load. There is an excellent infrastructure for student media production.

While the production of academic research has grown, the committee found the School lacked a strong focus on any particular specialization. Rather, the School presented itself as wanting to cover a wide spectrum of areas within communication studies. The School needs to take stock of itself and focus its research on a small number of specific topics within the discipline. In addition, it needs to seek external research grants on these topics.

Another issue that the School needs to address is the large number of students who are admitted on probation (approx. 50%). Based on the self-evaluation report numbers and CHE regulations, the School is out of compliance. This needs to be corrected during the next admissions process and should be reported to CHE staff. In addition, the School needs to help the students develop their English-language skills.

Section 3: Observations

3.1 The Institution

Ariel University began as a college in 1982. It was given the authority to award academic degrees in 1996, and it made the transition to becoming a university in 2007. It gained its final accreditation as a university in 2012. The campus is in the municipality of Ariel and according to its website, has 16,000 students and 495 senior faculty.

According to its website, "Ariel University presents a fresh perspective on contemporary Zionism and strives to revive the values of nation-building through dedication to excellence in science and research and championing social challenges." This is a long-term vision and the University is new. They have put resources into excellence in research, and in the next decade, their success can be better measured.

3.2 Internal Quality Assurance

The self-evaluation report was developed in collaboration with the Academic Assessment and Development Unit and the faculty of the School of Communication. The self-evaluation report noted that the process of developing the document itself resulted in increased awareness of different issues by faculty members, for example,

the need to collaborate with the Student Services Center to help struggling students. The final report was reviewed by the faculty before submission. The document also noted the need to further develop processes related to faculty recruitment (p. 11). The evaluation committee did note that the University did not report some of the information that was requested in the self-evaluation report.

3.3 Parent Unit

The School of Communication is a separate unit in the University and is not under another faculty or school.

3.4 Study program

The School of Communication is considered one of Ariel University's top-performing programs, according to the university leadership. Currently, the School offers a BA degree in five track areas: Digital Communication; Strategic Communication; Radio; Film and Television; and Journalism. Students are required to do an internship and complete 136 credits for their degree. The first year is focused on the theoretical and conceptual background of the discipline, and the following two years include more hands-on experience and final capstone projects such as media or campaign productions. Students indicated the blend of practical and conceptual-theoretical learning was at the right balance. The curriculum is approved and reviewed by the School's Curriculum Committee.

The students mentioned that they needed to choose their track early in their time at the university, in the middle of the second semester. They said it was good to have time to choose, but also mentioned that they knew too little of some of the tracks. Some students also noted a concern that they were graduating without sufficient English skills, as the general university English-language training courses were not effective in helping students achieve their desired proficiency level. It was noted in the self-evaluation report, for example, that the School is planning on offering coursework in English. The possibility of giving individual lectures in English in each class may also be considered. The evaluation committee also heard that much of the reading material was in Hebrew.

Of note, the School has started an honors track for students to do research. This track helps train students in research so they are academically positioned to enter the MA program. Students who had participated in this program said that they really enjoyed the opportunity to conduct research with faculty. This program also allowed them to work as research assistants. Some of these students had initially been admitted to the School on probation, and this opportunity empowered them greatly.

3.4.1 Training

Students are required to do an internship, which typically requires 100 hours of work in a site relevant to their study program. The School website lists the internships available in each track, and internships are vetted by faculty supervisors of the track area. The internship sites must be approved by the faculty supervisors. The School assesses the internships regularly by surveying students after their participation and reconsiders student placement at internship sites that receive poor ratings from students. The self-evaluation report listed many internship worksites, but not the number of students who had participated in these worksites as they reported not tracking the number of students at each site. Nevertheless, the list of worksites was impressive, including television, marketing, and governmental bodies. Students and alumni reported being satisfied with their internship experiences, which helped them decide what they did or did not like about certain workplaces. This allowed them to further refine their skills, ensuring they were marketable in the workplace.

3.4.2 Internationalization

While the university has agreements with several international universities, the evaluation committee was not provided with information on current programs in which students could study abroad. The self-evaluation report noted that there were some exchange programs with Moscow University in Russia.

The Head of the School noted in his presentation that the school maintains academic collaborations with top-tier universities and film programs around the world.

The use of English to internationalize opportunities for students was mentioned in the self-evaluation report. Ariel University may consider how it can improve this aspect of education generally for all its students.

3.5 Teaching and Learning outcomes

3.5.1 Teaching

The University has an Academic Assessment and Development Unit, which focuses on the improvement of faculty members' teaching skills. Teaching is evaluated primarily through student evaluations, which are administered by the Unit. These evaluations are used to reward high-scoring faculty members and identify faculty members who are in need of remediation. Instructors that do not receive a score above a 3 (on a scale of 5) receive mentoring. They meet with the track head and are asked to participate in workshops focused on helping them to increase their scores. The evaluation committee was told that this seemed rather like a punishment rather than an opportunity for growth. Faculty who received a 4.5 and above are rewarded with certificates of achievement for teaching.

Students conveyed that they felt the faculty were dedicated to their teaching and to their students. The students said that the availability of faculty and staff, and their “open-door policy” helped them succeed.

As a result of the pandemic, the University is working to leverage digital technologies for teaching. The School has become the pilot site for testing a hybrid classroom. Instructors told the evaluation committee of the value and flexibility the video-enhanced classrooms offered in meeting and delivering content to students. Some instructors noted they offer one virtual class session a week and then one in-person session for their class. Students like that the classes were recorded. They noted it was an aid when studying for exams or other assessments. The evaluation committee encourages the School to continue its experimentation with teaching models and to systematically track its successes and note areas for improvement.

3.5.2 Learning outcomes

According to the self-evaluation report, learning outcomes are presented in the syllabi using Bloom’s taxonomy of writing course objectives. The objectives are met mostly through papers and final projects, while about one quarter to one third are met through exams. The self-evaluation report notes faculty are primarily responsible for assessing student learning in their classes and have the autonomy to assign grades. In those cases where the grades are too high (above 85) or too low (below 65), the Head of the School determines whether the grades are approved or not. Even though nearly all the students enter on probation (as will be discussed below), the greatest proportion of final grades earned by students is between 86 and 90.

3.6 Students

3.6.1 Admission and graduation

The School offers a variety of metrics that allow for admission based on a combination of matriculation scores, English scores, and psychometric exams. It also has several specialized admissions for pre-academic preparatory courses, as a practical engineer or as a double major.

According to the self-evaluation Report, (p. 72), a larger proportion of students are allowed admission as probationary students (there is no information in the self-evaluation regarding the percent of probationary students who are finally enrolled). To be admitted on probation, students must have: a matriculation average of 85-88; an interview with the Admissions Committee; and a letter to the committee. The average number of students admitted on probation for the year was:

Year	Number admitted on probation	Total Admitted (Both directly and on probation)	Percent
2016-2107	72	139	51.7%
2017-2018	63	115	54.7%
2018-2019	77	134	57.5%

According to the decision of the Council for Higher Education from 12 September 2017, institutions will be allowed to accept only 10% of all students in each program on probation. The evaluation committee does not have the total percentage of students who enrolled in later years, yet the percentage of students admitted on probation appears to be trending upward. According to these numbers, the School is in violation of CHE standards on admissions.

The faculty noted that students who entered on probation tended to do less well in academic courses, but thrived in workshops and in hands-on skills courses. The evaluation committee also heard from probationary students who appeared to enjoy and excel in their honors research courses.

The drop-out rate for students has declined. In 2012-2013, the rate was 14.5%. In 2015-2016, this was reduced to 8%. The Head of the School noted that they worked really hard to keep students in school by providing individual services and identifying early those students who are struggling.

3.6.2 Graduate students

The School of Communication has submitted a MA degree program request to CHE for consideration.

3.6.3 Student support services

As a part of the campus tour, the evaluation committee asked about students' access to support services. In response to this, the faculty members noted that students had access to various types of counseling and career services. There are services for students with special needs and students who are struggling. In addition, the self-evaluation notes that there are services particularly for women (e.g., support during pregnancy) and minority students (e.g., tutoring).

In addition, there are various sports and recreation facilities, practical day-to-day services, and access to religious facilities. The evaluation committee did not visit these sites nor did the committee visit the library.

3.6.4 Alumni

The evaluation committee met with several alumni. Some of them had studied at the institution before it became a university and others were more recent graduates. It must be said that all of the alumni were complimentary of the School. They mentioned they appreciated the supportive atmosphere, and some said that they felt free to call faculty and discuss various issues even after they had graduated. According to the self-evaluation report, an alumni online portal provides access to alumni-related events and job opportunities.

Most alumni said their required internships helped them to understand the working world and in some cases led to concrete jobs. At the same time, the alumni felt that exposure to theory was important, and learning about broader principles had helped them in their graduate studies in other institutions.

3.7 Human Resources

The School of Communication has 17 faculty members, 13 of whom are research/academic scholars and 4 are practical/professional faculty. The ratio of faculty to students is very good (in Israeli terms), 17 faculty to 370 students (1 to 22). There is a good distribution of the faculty across academic ranks, with faculty members serving as lecturers, senior lecturers, and professors. The faculty will lose some members in the coming years due to retirement and will need to search for faculty replacements. This search should be guided by a more focused vision for the School. The new recruits should be hired based on their ability to help the School develop its specialization, areas of strength, and uniqueness.

The faculty is aware of the promotion process and the criteria employed for the process. It appears that the faculty invests in research and publications, and as noted below in the Research section, they are quite successful in this domain. However, as noted below, there is a clear need to increase submissions to competitive external grants.

Regular faculty teach four courses a semester. Faculty members who serve as track heads receive a one-course reduction but still teach seven courses a year. This echoes the earlier comment that the faculty carry a heavy teaching while also being asked to provide university service, in addition to research, without much in the way of course reductions. The evaluation committee was impressed by the faculty who note that they enjoy being in the school, like the social and academic atmosphere, and know what is expected of them. Yet, the faculty did not have a clear idea about the evaluation of their work: What is the weight given to teaching, to research, to

administrative functioning? A better introduction to and transparency of the faculty evaluation is required.

Finally, Ariel University is in the midst of a shift, namely a gradual process from being a college that relied mostly on practical programs, to a university that promotes academic research. This shift is reflected in the School's heavier emphasis on research and publishing. The change also affects human resources in terms of the recent recruitments, the promotion criteria, and the socialization of new faculty.

3.8 Diversity

The University and the School were, in general, well aware of the issue of diversity of students and faculty. They are implementing several measures to achieve more diversity. There is a clear outreach to students from the geographic periphery, students from the area, Arab students, students with special needs, and Ethiopian Jews. At the School level, however, the success is partial.

There are very few Arab students in general at Ariel University. While, for example, Engineering is more successful at recruiting Arab students, as noted by the Head of the School, this is because these students are focused on getting jobs. When compared to the technical majors, communication as a discipline does not appear to offer a promising career path. Nevertheless, the School does its best to attract more Arab students, including hosting classes of Arab high-school pupils. A related issue is the lack of Arab faculty in the School (a more general problem in Israeli academia). However, the location of the institution on the West Bank is a major barrier to this ambition.

Finally, it needs to be noted that the School participates in the University's special program for high-functioning autistic students, providing them full access to the courses and special assistance in their studies.

3.9 Research

In their self-evaluation report, the School of Communication noted the faculty who are engaged in a variety of research fields. It also mentioned how diversity enriches the faculty's research. Faculty are active in the use of both traditional and advanced forms of data collection, e.g., virtual reality, and collaborate with other researchers from other Israeli colleges and universities.

The report also notes that the faculty at the College have been active in its research and publication efforts. The evaluation committee clearly sees among the existing faculty a pivot toward research and publication during the last years. This ethos of research is a very positive development. An examination of the faculty's publication record shows that they have been active in writing. It was also good to hear that the

University supports faculty with various forms of research support, such as editing, translation, and funds to pay for data collection.

In the discussion with the Head of the School, the evaluation committee learned that the faculty produce approximately 2-3 publications a year. It is very encouraging to hear that the faculty is active in the pursuit of publications and in quality publications. As they pursue this work, and as they become more recognized in particular areas of study, this will be reflected in higher citation rates. The School is somewhat early in the development of this latter criterion at the moment.

An issue that arose is that the faculty does not currently have a particular research focus or foci. When asked about their main research areas, the faculty suggested that it is new media or digital communication. Unfortunately, this broad label encompasses much of the communication field. Choosing this as a focus does not address the issue of how the School needs to focus its research efforts. The self-evaluation report lists several dozen “communication research topics” (p. 106) with which the School is involved. This is far too broad.

As the School continues on its path toward becoming a well-regarded academic unit, there is an absolute need to focus. While there are advantages to attempting to cover many topic areas, it is difficult to develop a synergetic critical mass of scholars at Ariel University who focus on a particular topic. It means that the vetting of new hires into the School will be less systematic. It means that other Israeli and international scholars who are seeking collaboration for, for example, grants, will not have Ariel on their cognitive radar, and there is no profile that will attract new MA students (assuming that this program is started). The School has people who are successfully working in particular areas. While faculty are successfully working in the areas of sports communication, political communication, advertising, the digital divide, and online threats, these (or other) foci could eventually be developed into research specializations. The School must take stock of itself and determine the three to five areas in which it will develop a core of research, just as it has to decide not to pursue other lines of research.

On a related note, the evaluation committee sees a lot of internal funding for research support, and suggests that the faculty actively compete for external research grants. Specifically, the evaluation team suggests international competitive grants such as the German-Israeli Foundation, the US-Israel Binational Science Foundation, the Israel Science Foundation, and agencies within the European Union.

The faculty enjoys the services of a research institute that focuses on new media, society and politics and that facilitates collaboration with the media industry. The research institute also arranges for excellent students to serve as research assistants for the faculty’s research projects.

3.10 Infrastructure and Facilities

The evaluation committee was taken on a tour of the School's in-house facilities. The team was impressed with the video studios, editing rooms, radio station, film studio, and computer classrooms. Further, the committee was taken on a virtual reality tour of the School and participated in a mock radio broadcast.

The committee also heard from students about their satisfaction with the services and the facilities provided. The school certainly enjoys high-level technical facilities. The library and the general students' services facilities were not visited. According to the self-evaluation, the library has a collection related to the study of communication including the subfields of, among other things, mass communications, communications and technology, journalism, marketing, public relations, radio broadcasting, and television. It is difficult for the evaluation committee to understand the completeness of the collection since there was no site visit.

One issue that came up was "a shortage of offices for the faculty," as described in the self-evaluation report (p. 185). The school's location makes it isolated from other faculties and services, but the School's plan to move to a new, more spacious building may solve these problems.

Section 4: Conclusions and Recommendations

The evaluation committee found that the recent pivot towards research has been a positive development. There is growing evidence of the success of this transition. The committee applauds the ethos of research and publication which was seen in the School. The committee was also happy to see the efforts in the name of diversity for students on the autistic spectrum. On another note, the team was not made aware of a university-wide strategic plan for diversity or if there were dedicated full-time staff that had this remit.

The committee found that adjunct faculty were aware of a well-recognized path to promotion. In addition, the students and alumni are satisfied with their choice to study at Ariel University. Finally, there is excellent infrastructure.

The evaluation committee found several challenges facing the School of Communication. There is a need for a plan to harness its strong research focus and direct it toward a particular set of academic areas. This must be more fine-grained than the current level of abstraction. Following this, there is a need to seek and secure external research grants.

The fact that the School admits more than half of its students, while they are on probation, must be addressed.

Finally, several other issues require attention. First, the evaluation criteria for faculty need to be made clear. Second, the use of English by the students' needs to be improved. The School needs to develop a strategy with which to improve students' English-language skills. Third, the School should strive to develop a diversity plan for faculty. Lastly, they should continue to develop their post-COVID technologies for pedagogical purposes.

4.1 Recommendations

Essential

The School needs to develop a plan to harness its strong research efforts as well as focus on a clear, smaller set of academic areas.

The School needs to sort out the "on probation" problem. The fact that the School admits more than half of its students while they are on probation, must be addressed. It must come into compliance with CHE regulations.

Important

The School must develop and submit research proposals, targeting competitive international funding.

The School and the University should develop a concrete strategic plan for improving the diversity of students and faculty.

The School needs to develop a plan through which the students' English-language skills can be improved.

The School needs to clarify the evaluation criteria for faculty tenure and promotion.

Desirable

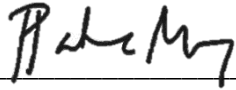
The School and the University need to solve the space problems for the faculty.

The School and the University need to continue with the development of post-COVID technologies for teaching.

Signed by:

Prof. Patricia Moy

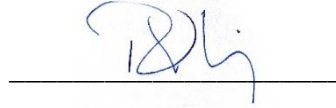
Committee Chair



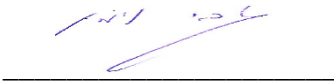
Prof. María Len-Ríos



Prof. Richard Ling



Prof. Gabriel Weimann



Appendix I: Letter of Appointment



November 2021

Prof. Patricia Moy
Department of Communication
University of Washington
USA

Dear Professor,

The Israeli Council for Higher Education (CHE) strives to ensure the continuing excellence and quality of Israeli higher education through a systematic evaluation process. By engaging upon this mission, the CHE seeks: to enhance and ensure the quality of academic studies, to provide the public with information regarding the quality of study programs in institutions of higher education throughout Israel, and to ensure the continued integration of the Israeli system of higher education in the international academic arena.

As part of this important endeavor we reach out to world renowned academicians to help us meet the challenges that confront the Israeli higher education by accepting our invitation to participate in our international evaluation committees. This process establishes a structure for an ongoing consultative process around the globe on common academic dilemmas and prospects.

I therefore deeply appreciate your willingness to join us in this crucial enterprise.

It is with great pleasure that I hereby appoint you to serve as chair of the Council for Higher Education's Committee for the Evaluation of **Communications** departments. In addition to yourself, the composition of the Committee will be as follows: Prof. Mark Deuze, prof. Richard Ling, prof. Karen Ross, prof. Dhavan V. Shah, and prof. Gabriel Weimann.

Details regarding the operation of the committee and its mandate are provided in the enclosed appendix.

I wish you much success in your role as a member of this most important committee.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ido Perlman'.

Prof. Ido Perlman
Vice Chair,
The Council for Higher Education (CHE)

Enclosures: Appendix to the Appointment Letter of Evaluation Committees

cc: Dr. Varda Ben-Shaul, Deputy Director-General for QA, CHE
Ms. Maria Levinson-Or, Senior Advisor for Evaluation and Quality Enhancement, CHE