EVALUATION OF COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS

NETANYA ACADEMIC COLLEGE

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 Israel[1], 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.

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[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 Netanya Academic College was conducted on 30.03.2022);
- 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 Netanya Academic College. 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 their 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 30 March 2022. During that visit, the evaluation committee met with the College leadership, the head

of the School, the full-time and adjunct faculty, BA and MA students, and alumni. The team also was given a tour of the campus.

The School of Communication at Netanya Academic College shows a great commitment to its local community. The committee found that this came through at many levels, including the empowerment expressed by the students.

The School, however, is quite small and it is coping with two transitions. The first is the rebirth of the BA program as a double major in collaboration with the School of Business Administration. The second is that some of the current faculty are approaching retirement. Solving these two issues will be key for the future of the School. Beyond these major issues, the School needs to recruit students at the BA and the MA levels.

Section 3: **Observations**

3.1 The Institution

Netanya Academic College was established in 1995 as a non-budgeted institution of higher education. The College offers undergraduate (BA/BSc) degrees and graduate degrees (MA/MSc) in ten study programs, including Banking and Finance, Behavioral Sciences, Business Administration, Communication, and others. The purpose of the College is to provide academic education to a diverse student population. According to the President, the College was founded to serve those on the social periphery of Israel, allowing them to access higher education close to home. Special scholarships are provided for Netanya residents, a group that includes many Israelis who have emigrated from all over the world. Netanya Academic College also serves many first-generation students.

3.2 Internal Quality Assurance

The self-evaluation report notes that units at Netanya Academic College are assessed on a six-year cycle (p. 8). The report also discusses the use of teaching evaluations and peer-review of syllabi as a part of the institution's quality-assurance efforts.

The main recommendations from the self-evaluation notes that the School has not operated a BA program during the recent years. As will be noted below, the College has addressed the re-establishment of a dual-degree BA program where the student takes two majors and receives a diploma in Business Administration/Communication. This means that the BA program has not generated a legacy of information on the courses, the students, the faculty, etc. This affects the evaluation committee's ability to take a long-term evaluative perspective on the program.

The self-evaluation report was developed through cooperation between faculty members and administrative officers. The writing tasks were distributed and coordinated through various Zoom meetings, email groups and WhatsApp meetings. According to the self-report document, this collaborative process included interactions between the Dean and faculty. The final document was read and commented on by all faculty members before submission to the Rector.

3.3 Parent Unit

There is no parent unit.

3.4 Study program

The School of Communication is one of the smallest units within Netanya Academic College. The School currently offers both an MA and a BA degree. The BA degree in communication reported having 47 students in 2017/18 and 60 students in 2018/19. These numbers refer to the single-major program as opposed to the dual-major program. The single-major program was closed in 2019/2020, and reopened as a dual-major in 2020/2021 with 19 enrolled students.

At the MA level, the school typically enrolls between 25 to 30 students a year, yet, according to students interviewed by the evaluation committee, in 2021/22 just 9 students entered the program. Currently, there are a combined 53 students in the two BA programs (2020-22), and there are 9 in the MA program for the 2021-22 academic year. During the site visit, the evaluation committee learned the College's goal is to have 40 students in the MA communication major and 70 in the combined communication/business major.

While in 1999/2000 the College began a robust BA degree program, that program was closed in 2019 due to a lack of applicants. It had just recently reopened as a combined double-major degree program, jointly with the School of Business Administration in 2020-2021. The dual-major BA is a two-year program (three semesters per year), and it allows students to take 63 credits in Communication and 61 credits in Business Administration. Students said that they chose to come to Netanya's School of Communication specifically for this unique combination of a two-year degree that includes business concepts.

Due to the recent reopening of the BA program, data do not yet exist that would allow us to assess the program, in terms of students who have successfully graduated from the program, for example. Also, for the context of this report, the evaluation committee must acknowledge that the recent COVID pandemic has been challenging for higher education overall.

The MA program is a two-year-long program, which mainly enrolls students who currently work as teachers at the primary- and secondary-school levels. Besides

upgrading their credentials, they see communication as a useful skill to incorporate into the classroom. Students take their first year of theoretical courses, laboratory courses, and seminars. The second year is largely dedicated to two seminars and the implementation of their final project. The evaluation committee was told that during this time many primary and secondary school teachers (who make up many of the current students) were overburdened by teaching during the pandemic, which might explain the dip in numbers.

Students can be accepted into the Communication MA program without having a BA background in communication. This required the School to establish a preparatory-course sequence to ensure that students achieve a common basic understanding of the communication field. Students take mini-courses in introductory media studies, methods for research in communication, along with two others.

The readings listed on the provided course syllabi appear to meet the same standards offered in many international communication programs. There is an introductory course in English, though the students' proficiency in English is unclear. During the meeting with the students, the majority of their responses were translated from Hebrew. The evaluation committee was curious about this since this is a common expectation for communication majors.

3.4.1 Training

For the BA program, the focus of the degree is largely on the study of theory in the classroom with additional hands-on experience gained through workshop courses, projects, and extracurricular activities.

At the MA level, students who are recruited to the program already are working as educators, for the most part, in the Israeli school-level education system. Thus, they are already in a position to practice what they are learning. Aside from the workshops students take in their first year, there is no formal training as part of the program. Instead, the student's final projects include taking what they have learned in their MA coursework and implementing their final projects in the classrooms with their pupils. As noted below, the students and alumni of the program said that they found the final projects to be a rewarding and creative process.

3.4.2 Internationalization

While the College has agreements with several international universities (see page 29 of the self-evaluation report), the evaluation committee was not provided with information on current student-exchange programs for the School. When examining the international possibilities for the students, there are not many options. The evaluation committee did not learn of any international programs, joint studies, or visiting faculty. In addition, as noted below, some linguistic barriers may frustrate this type of activity.

The faculty have sabbaticals and may choose to work and do research abroad during that time. According to information gathered by the evaluation committee, the Research Authority provides seed money to help develop research proposals. The faculty get travel funding in their contracts. In addition, new hires get a research package, based on their degree, and have a sabbatical that is equivalent to what is given at a university.

The international collaborations of the School of Communication at this time relate to faculty interacting with international colleagues, an issue that was difficult during the pandemic. It is not surprising the international partnerships are rather informal at this time, as the BA program is restarting and the MA program is focused on providing Israeli primary and secondary educators a way to enhance their teaching nationally.

3.5 Teaching and Learning outcomes

3.5.1 Teaching

The two existing BA cohorts are composed of 56 students, which allows for teaching students in small class sizes. Indeed, students mentioned small class sizes as an appeal to learning at Netanya's Communication program. They noted that they get to know the faculty as human beings.

Regarding faculty classroom support, motivated by the recent pandemic, the College offers training support for pivoting classes to online. Clearly this has been used extensively when the College moved to virtual learning during the pandemic and, according to information collected by the evaluation committee, may become a part of normal operations.

Overall, through the Center for Teaching and Learning, the College offers faculty members several opportunities to receive additional training in teaching techniques. Senior faculty mentioned they could get training there for upgrading of skills. The self-evaluation report also noted that the Center for Teaching and Learning started offering a mid-year teaching seminar and workshop in 2019-20, and that the Center's Advisor offers faculty personal coaching services. At a more informal level, during COVID times, teachers and students used WhatsApp to communicate problems and keep in touch. Camera equipment has been installed in all classrooms, and courses are automatically recorded. These recordings can be shared with students afterward, and students can tune in remotely if they have a reason to be at home (i.e., they are sick). The College encourages students to attend courses face-to-face. Students were mixed as to their thoughts about modes of preferred instruction.

The undergraduate students reported feeling less pressure when classes were taught via Zoom. They noted that classes were easier to manage, and said it was sometimes easier to concentrate when using Zoom. They also suggested that the professors were

forced to think "out of the box" in these situations. This had the effect of making the online classes more engaging. There was also an enhanced ability to teach in a flexible manner. This was seen by the evaluation committee who visited campus on the day after a nearby attack. Indeed, the entire institution had pivoted to online teaching in the wake of this event. That said, the students noted that they did enjoy the face-to-face interaction. In sum, the students seemed to prefer a more flexible, hybrid solution. This was somewhat different from the understanding of the faculty who see the face-to-face model of pedagogy as central.

The School takes part in student evaluations conducted by the College. These are done each semester and consist of quantitative criteria, e.g., evaluation of the course content and structure, the quality of the teaching, and the academic materials used. These evaluations are reviewed by both the Rector and the Dean. The results are shown to the instructors and then discussed by the Dean with the individual faculty members.

3.5.2 Learning outcomes

At the BA level, students have yet to graduate from the program (the first graduates will be in 2022-23), so there are no final grade averages available for evaluation. According to the self-evaluation report, it is the School's ambition to teach students about the key traditions of communication studies, how to critically approach communicative activities in today's complex media sphere, how to communicate effectively, and how to pursue a career in communication.

An examination of the curriculum matches the learning outcomes for the communication side of the degree, but it does not include the learning outcomes related to the synergy from the business side of the degree. The evaluation committee expects the Communication faculty to coordinate learning outcomes with the Business Administration faculty to ensure synergy between the two majors.

There are no formal examinations for MA students. The students are evaluated on the final projects. Exemplars of those projects were provided. They indicated that one metric of program success is showing how individuals can analyze media productions and engage in critical thinking, through applying theory to the final project. The exemplars provided illustrate how the students are engaging in media theories, critically analyzing media texts, and translating them to "reality" from different points of view, which are the stated intended learning outcomes from the self-evaluation report. As presented in the self-evaluation report (p. 38), final grade averages from 2017 to 2020 were above 85.

3.6 Students

3.6.1 Admission and graduation

Undergraduate students are recruited for the program through online advertising and traditional communication channels, through advisers in the College and the admissions office. Notably, there is a strong synergy between the College and the local municipality: Local students are eligible for financial support from the municipality, and students indicated this is a strong inducement to study there.

Considering the new BA program, it enrolled 16 students in its opening year and 40 students in its second year. The evaluation committee was told that the target number of admissions eventually would be 70 BA students per annum. There does not seem to be any information regarding the admission criteria to the BA program in the self-evaluation. The evaluation committee found that to enroll in the program, the students do not need to meet a psychometric test requirement. Criteria for admissions in the MA program, according to the self-evaluation report, include the requirement that applicants have earned a BA diploma with at least an average of 80% in their coursework. Successful completion of preparatory coursework is required of applicants who do not hold a BA degree in Communication in order to be admitted to the MA program. There are additional criteria used for those who do not meet these conditions, and enroll on a conditional basis.

When asked whether the small size of the School's faculty and students was an issue for them when they applied, the students responded quite positively, saying that the small size allowed them more contact with the faculty.

3.6.2 Graduate students

The School has a non-thesis MA program that is oriented toward career individuals, usually primary and secondary school teachers, who are seeking professional development. The committee met with several of the current MA students. They were uniformly satisfied with their experience in the School. They noted that the College's local proximity facilitated their organizing everyday logistics, which often included work and caring for children. It was clear for the evaluation committee that Netanya Academic College has the mission to serve the surrounding area. This includes the mission to educate the immigrants that settled in the area.

The MA students also felt that they were learning things in class that had direct relevance to their working lives. One student mentioned, for example, that she had a semester project on how to organize teaching during COVID. Given that the individual was working in a school, she was able to bring her academic and working lives together in this assignment.

It needs to be noted that the students with whom the evaluation committee met were weak in English. One might expect that students at this level would be stronger in this domain.

3.6.3 Student support services

There is a range of support services for various groups at the College and within the School, such as linguistic and financial student services. The College provides preparatory and remedial programs for students who need to bring their use of Hebrew up to a higher level. There was a system of scholarships and academic support for the students (for instance, mentors assist students who do not have Hebrew as their first language). Support includes 0% interest loans that students do not have to begin repaying until graduation. As noted above, the College provides help to students from the Netanya area; through a joint scholarship from the municipality and the College, these students receive a special 27% reduction in tuition fees.

In addition, a student association provides a number of social activities (e.g., sports activities) as well as various forms of advice. Finally, there is a Career Services office that the team did not see during their campus tour. However, the BA students in the Communication program are only now coming to the stage where they will need this. The MA students were already established in their teaching careers.

In the wake of the COVID pandemic, the School has developed and enhanced its ability to support remote teaching. Many classrooms are equipped with video cameras to record the lectures such that students who are unable to attend can watch the lectures.

3.6.4 Alumni

The evaluation committee met with several alumni from the MA program. They all were teachers and came from diverse groups (e.g., Jewish, Arab). The alumni were uniformly positive about their experience in the program. Indeed, several of them spoke of the critical insight and the empowerment they had gained by attending the program.

Many of the alumni lived nearby the College. Given that they were working and often had domestic responsibilities, the local nature of the College was seen as an advantage. Echoing the broader ethos of inclusion and multiculturalism, the alumni were also positive to this dimension of their experience at the College. They described how their studies had given them a broader perspective that went beyond a simple practical education, e.g., a sense of empowerment from pursuing an education. While there is no official alumni network, alumni mostly talked about keeping in touch with their professors. This further emphasizes the sense of belonging and student empowerment.

3.7 Human Resources

The School of Communication is currently in a transition state, recovering from a major crisis with its BA program. In its early years, the BA program enjoyed a large number of students, numerous faculty members (including several professors), and a very positive academic reputation (in terms of the level of research, the level of the students graduating in the School, etc.). Yet, there was a sharp decline in the number of students, and that caused the College management to decide to close down the BA program. They also lost a significant number of faculty. The School retained some of its faculty for a new MA program.

The School is now trying to re-establish itself and find new ways to maintain its program. However, the changes made during the crisis period left the School with a relatively small number of faculty (it lost some major professors and lecturers who had found new positions at other universities and colleges). The School is hiring two new faculty members, but they are junior faculty who are just starting their academic careers as lecturers.

With the upcoming retirement of the Dean of the School, additional senior faculty must be hired to lead the school, guide and mentor the junior faculty, and promote the unit's recovery. The evaluation committee did not hear of any strategy or plan aimed at achieving this. There is a need for the College and School to put in place a continuation plan to assure the future success of the programs in the School of Communication before this change in leadership occurs.

The senior faculty noted that they appreciated the transparency with which the School was led. It is positive that faculty generally felt there was an open door to administration. That said, the small faculty size affects the research, teaching load, and administrative load. There is little room for research teams, group work on research, or joint publications, all of which help faculty advance in their careers and enable them to become the future leaders of the School. The small size of the faculty also limits the variety of courses and lecturers; students said they take 3 and 4 courses with the same lecturer. While students noted that they feel there is a personal acquaintance, they are in fact exposed to a limited scope of subjects, methods, and approaches.

3.8 Diversity

The College is highly conscious of social diversity and so is the School of Communication. Despite the high tuition fees, the students come from all social strata, including low-income, immigrant, and Arab-Israeli communities. The Dean of the School of Communication clearly stated that the School has a social mission it strives to accomplish.

There is a high percentage of Arab students in the School. The self-evaluation report did not include breakdowns, yet the evaluation committee was told it was around 20% in the BA program and 45% in the MA program. The BA and MA students with whom the evaluation committee met reported on the advantages of working together with students who come from different backgrounds. Thus, though the School does not have an official, formal policy of diversity, in practice they are diversity-oriented and quite successful in achieving that.

3.9 Research

The academic work at the School has a broad scope. As noted in the self-evaluation report (p. 15), the faculty strives to bring out "the interrelations between media and multiple socio-cultural, political, economic, institutional and technological factors; and placing communication research within its varied broader theoretical origins." As with the recruitment of students, it must be underscored that a dimension of multiculturalism and diversity is obvious in the research of the unit.

According to the self-evaluation report, the School's research focuses on the various dimensions of communication as an academic discipline, e.g., sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and linguistics. In addition, there is recognition of film as well as mediated technology's role. The evaluation committee was told that two faculty members would be added that conduct research on digital technologies. One of the new faculty members is currently teaching these courses as an adjunct.

The School does indeed have a history of producing research. Several of the existing faculty have a record of writing journal articles and academic conference papers. In turn, these papers are recognized (and cited) by their academic colleagues. The younger faculty also show promise.

Given the re-configuration of the School and given the generational transitions it is facing, it may be necessary to review the unit's academic trajectory as this transition matures.

It was apparent from the discussions with the faculty that time and resources are available for research, e.g., research funds, research assistants, and a shared ethos of doing research. They also noted that there was a system for sabbaticals, a practice that is not common at the level of colleges.

Another positive dimension of the research situation is that the College has established a Research Authority (albeit staffed by a single person) that supplies seed funding and assists with securing grants. There is also support for attending conferences. There is also the sense that senior faculty mentor the junior members.

3.10 Infrastructure and Facilities

Based on the self-evaluation report and the evaluation committee's tour of the facilities, there was a good overview of the facilities provided to the students. The team toured the computer labs, TV studio, radio studio, library, and lecture halls. At its current state of having less than 100 students in total, the evaluation committee believes that the infrastructure is adequate for the curriculum.

The team noted that there has been a focus on developing digital access during the recent pandemic. This was seen in the video facilities and other forms of digital support for teaching. The new approach to teaching will likely become a part of the new teaching/learning landscape.

Section 4:   Conclusions and Recommendations

Note: It is difficult to evaluate the nature of the BA program since it is so new and the evaluation committee was not provided with enough information on the courses, the students, the faculty, etc. This also affects our ability to compare the current evaluation with the former process in 2009 and the review of implementation in 2012, since both refer to the former situation. Much of this has changed drastically.

On the positive side, the School is committed to the community, which mostly plays out in the diversity of students. It was also obvious that students appreciated the smaller classes and the attention of the faculty. It also was seen in the sense of empowerment felt by the students (especially the MA students).

The challenge facing the School is that the faculty is rather small. Upcoming retirements point to the need to recruit senior faculty. Both the School and College will need to think through their post-COVID technology strategy. The team found that students have become more accustomed to remote learning than the faculty. Thus, a policy in this area will need to be developed that allows for flexible IT solutions. Further, these solutions cannot be a one-time solution or stopgap measure, but rather will have to consider the evolution of pedagogic technologies. Finally, the students' level of English was low, an important issue that needs to be addressed.

4.1 Recommendations

Essential

The School is in a "state of transition" both in terms of starting a new BA program and in terms of a generation shift among the faculty. This requires that the School develop a vision and a plan that covers the next 3-5 years.

First, the School and the College need to consider the trajectory of the BA program that was closed some years ago and only reopened recently, with a limited capacity and only one track. There is a need to carefully think through the framing and the viability of this program (e.g., its ability to attract students).

Second, the School needs to develop a specific policy for recruiting high-level faculty to assist in the coming generational transition. There are both immediate and long-term dimensions to this issue. Given the unit's new direction, which the current core faculty is too small. In addition, the upcoming retirement of the Dean needs to be taken into consideration.

The CHE should monitor the plans for recruitment, the level of the faculty employed, and the replacement of retiring senior faculty (especially at the level of professors). Since the undergraduate program was closed and recently re-opened (with smaller faculty), this follow-up by the CHE is crucial.

Important

There is a need by the School to monitor the drop in the number of MA students. If this is a trend, it may threaten the future of the MA program. The School should consider combining it with educational classes.

There is a need for the School (and perhaps the College) to address the students' English-language abilities and to develop a plan to improve these skills.

The strong emphasis on "personal touch" with the students has consequences for the potential to do research. This is particularly an issue for the junior faculty who need to produce research for career advancement and promotion. The School needs to provide faculty with a pathway for promotion by apportioning them time to work on research, or else it may become a faculty retention issue.
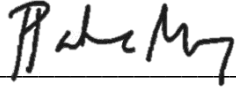
Desirable

To help bolster the number of students, the School and the College might seek additional double-major programs, following the newly tested combination of communication and MBA studies.

The Communication faculty should coordinate learning outcomes with the Business Administration faculty to ensure that there is synergy between the two majors.

The School should evaluate the role of hybrid-teaching solutions that allow students to better manage their studies.
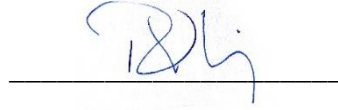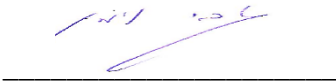
Signed by:

Prof. Patricia Moy

Committee Chair

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Prof. María Len-Ríos   Prof. Richard Ling

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Prof. Gabriel Weimann

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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,

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