



# EVALUATION OF POLITICAL SCIENCE STUDIES

## **ASHKELON ACADEMIC COLLEGE**

COMMITTEE FOR THE EVALUATION OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS STUDIES IN ISRAEL

## Section 1: Background and Procedures

- 1.1** In the academic year 2022, the Council for Higher Education [CHE] put in place arrangements for the evaluation of study programs in the field of Political Science and International Relations in Israel.
- 1.2** To undertake the evaluation, the Vice Chair of the CHE appointed a Committee consisting of<sup>1</sup>:
- **Prof. Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey** – *Chair*. Head of Department (2019-2022), Department of Government, LSE, UK, and Fellow of the British Academy.
  - **Prof. Dr. Tanja A. Börzel** – Professor of political science and chair for European Integration at the Otto Suhr Institute for Political Science, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany.
  - **Prof. Soo Yeon Kim** – Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore.
  - **Prof. Joel Migdal** – Robert F. Philip Professor of International Studies, University of Washington, USA.
  - **Prof. James Perry** – Professor of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University, USA.
  - **Prof. Avner de Shalit** – Political philosopher and Max Kampelman Chair of Democracy and Human Rights, Hebrew University, Israel.
  - **Prof. Nicholas Valentino** – Department of Political Science, and Research Professor in the Center for Political Studies, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, USA.

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

- 1.3** The evaluation process was conducted in accordance with the CHE's Guidelines for Self-Evaluation (January 2022). Within this framework the evaluation committee was required to:
- examine the self-evaluation reports submitted by the institutions that provide study programs in Political Science and International Relations;
  - conduct on-site visits at those institutions participating in the evaluation process;
  - 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;
  - 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;
- 1.4** The evaluation committee examined only the evidence provided by each participating institution — considering this 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, lecturers,

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<sup>1</sup> The committee's letter of appointment is attached as **Appendix 1**.

students, and alumni during the course of each one-day visit to each of the institutions.

- 1.5 In undertaking this work, the committee considered matters of quality assurance and quality enhancement — applying its collective knowledge of developments and good practices in the delivery of higher education in Political Science (mainly from European countries and the USA) to the evaluation of such provision in Israel.

## **Section 2: Executive Summary**

The Department of Politics and Government in the Ashkelon Academic College is relatively young, and therefore this evaluation process is the first it has undergone. The College and the Department aim to provide higher education for periphery residents and excellence in academic studies. The Department is relatively small, consisting of 6 lecturers, including the Head of Department, and around 20 students per cohort. It offers a BA as part of a double-major degree.

Unfortunately, the Committee could not visit the campus due to the security situation in May 2023. The Committee conducted meetings by Zoom with the leadership of the College and the Department, the lecturers, students, and two alumni. As an alternative to the missed visit, two members of the Committee who reside in Israel visited the campus about ten days later, met with the leadership of the College and the Department and had a tour in the library.

The Committee was impressed with how dedicated to their work the teachers were. The students went out of their way to compliment the teachers, their care for the students' academic achievements, as well as their well-being. The atmosphere in the department seems to be amicable and the teachers and the Head have harmonious relationships. The Department is struggling to increase the number of students, which is a precondition for its ability to recruit more lecturers. The Committee believes that despite the relatively small number of students, the Department has a great potential. To help achieve this, the Committee suggests several recommendations, which are listed towards the end of this report.

## **Section 3: Observations**

### **3.1 The institution and the parent unit**

Over the past 60 years, Ashkelon Academic College has evolved from consisting as a branch of Bar-Ilan University to ultimately being accredited by CHE as an independent entity with twenty departments. Among these departments, the Department of Politics and Government is among the smallest in terms of student enrolment.

The mission of the College is two-fold, to both provide higher education for periphery residents and at the same time, to provide excellence in academic studies. The Committee

applauds this mission, although it indeed recognizes the inherent tension in balancing these two aims.

The organizational structure and decision-making processes of the Department of Politics and Government appear to be very top-down, that is, the Head of Department appears to manage most of the process. For a small department, this may make sense in terms of efficiency. Moreover, faculty in the Department seem quite happy with the current arrangements, with many of them commenting that what they found most satisfying as faculty is the collegiality among them. Nonetheless, to better enable “buy-in” from all members of the Department, responsibilities should be shared more equitably among the faculty. Moreover, the role of Head of Department will at some point fall to other faculty, and so a more shared approach to decision-making allows for the professional development of subsequent Heads. **The Committee thus encourages a greater involvement of faculty in the decision-making processes.**

From the observations of the Committee, the relationship between the College leadership and the Head of Department appears to be amicable and productive. The Committee applauds this cooperative administrative arrangement.

The Committee was impressed with the General Director’s dedication to the College and his energy and insights. However, the Committee is surprised to note that not only does the General Director serve as a lecturer in the Department, but he seems to be involved in academic decisions such as granting scholarships, which appears to function in an ad-hoc manner. The Committee believes that although this enables a fast, dynamic, and sensitive service, it would be better if a scholarship committee is formed, headed by academics. Moreover, regulations for who is entitled to scholarships and for the application process should be drafted and made transparent for all students. **The Committee thus recommends that clear regulations for scholarships be written and published. The Committee also recommends that decisions about scholarships be taken by a committee of academics.**

### **3.2 Internal Quality Assurance**

The Committee welcomes the overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the Department of Politics and Government at Ashkelon Academic College, as presented in the Self-Evaluation Report (SER). Among the strengths is the aspiration to teach the young generation of the periphery about democracy, democratic institutions, and Israeli politics, which is important and vital to Israeli society. The SER specifically notes that the College “does not want to turn into an academic vocational training institution” (pg. 7).

At the same time, the SER recognized as weaknesses the small size of the Department (particularly in terms of student numbers) and the ongoing security threat from the Gaza Strip. As for the latter, the Committee was made particularly cognizant of this security threat, given that ongoing missile strikes on Ashkelon prevented the Committee from attending the campus in person. The Committee thus conducted its visit by Zoom, and is appreciative of the accommodations made by the College leadership, faculty, students, and alumni to make this virtual visit possible at short notice. A week later, two members of the Committee who reside in Israel did visit the campus and met the leadership.

The SER also notes that the Department is young, having been confirmed by the CHE only a few years ago. Thus, this is the first time that the Department has undergone a quality assurance process. It may be partly as a result of this first-time experience, but the Committee found many gaps and omissions in the SER and its supporting documents. In particular, many tables were left unfilled in the SER, and analyses of various areas in terms of student admissions, promotions criteria and process, and so on, were inadequate. **The Committee thus recommends that the Department work with the College to conduct an ongoing process of data gathering and data analysis.** This would also help to better understand the causes of its primary objective of increasing student numbers for its BA program.

Moreover, from the conversations between the Committee and both faculty and students, it was apparent that their involvement in the SER was non-existent. Indeed, most faculty to whom the Committee spoke had not even read the SER. This is a poor foundation for a comprehensive quality assurance process.

The Committee was surprised to learn that an entire dimension of the teaching program was not mentioned in the SER. Besides the students counted in the SER, there is an army program that apparently enrolls around 30 cadets a year in a 3-year BA program in the Department. The Committee also notes that the number of students mentioned in the report does not match the numbers given to the two members of the Committee who visited the College.

At the same time, the Committee recognizes and is grateful to the College leadership for its swift responses to requests of the Committee for additional information at the time of its Zoom visit and in the immediate aftermath of that visit.

The Department evaluated its overall performance in Internal Quality Assurance:

(1=unsatisfactory, 2=needs significant improvements, 3=needs minor improvements, 4=satisfactory, 5=highly satisfactory)

	1	2	3	4	5
				X	

The Evaluation Committee evaluated the Department's overall performance in Internal Quality Assurance:

	1	2	3	4	5
		X			

The Committee was disappointed with the quality of the SER, particularly with respect to relevant data and full analysis. Subsequent QA processes should entail more complete

engagement with data analysis, where relevant, and should also make a concerted effort to involve faculty and students in the process.

### 3.3 The Department/Study Program

The Committee applauds the approach taken by the College leadership with respect to the role of Political Science and Government in the curriculum as a whole. In the words of the Vice Rector, "The Social Sciences and the Arts are the soul of the University." The College is committed to maintaining and growing the Department, and there was no interest expressed in closing down the unit to focus scarce resources elsewhere. The Committee strongly agrees with this view. However, the small undergraduate student body enrolled in Political Science (70-80 students total, 20-25 per year, not including the army students) is concerning and is potentially unsustainable. The Administration was open to brainstorming ideas about improving the Study Program to make it more attractive to students, to which this section of the report is dedicated. The Committee offers additional ideas here.

The Committee had a chance to discuss the study program with lecturers, students, and alumni. The students and the alumni appreciated the Department's inclusiveness with respect to mature students with families, although more could be done. The students emphasized time and again how remarkable the lecturers are, that they take teaching seriously, and seek to teach in a student-friendly manner by incorporating students' interests in courses, and by giving them general professional advice after graduation. There is an amicable atmosphere, the lecturers are devoted to the students, and they care not only about the students' academic achievements, but also about their well-being in general. One of the students said that "I was an OK student in high school, not more, whereas in my studies here it was the first time I felt that I was really successful, thanks to the lecturers' belief in me." The relatively small number of lecturers go out of their way to teach courses that are not in their expertise, which is remarkable.

The Department currently has one track for training its students. This is a dual subject BA in the Department and in another department. Students may choose between i) Criminology and ii) Sociology and Anthropology. The Department offers study trips to the Knesset and the Supreme Court, which are very popular among the students. In addition, the Department offers extra-curricular courses, such as a short summer course at Luiss University, Rome, and a project at the municipality of Ashkelon, and it is considering introducing some kind of practicum.

The study program is interesting and academically adequate. Nevertheless, it is still limited by the number of available lecturers, and this is constrained by the very small undergraduate cohort. Both the students and the alumni said that they would have loved to study more courses in comparative politics and regional politics (like the ones they have on Chinese politics), an introduction to political economy, research methods, and courses on contemporary issues including regional conflicts. In addition, the Committee questions why as much as 10% of the Study Program (6 points) is devoted to Jewish Studies. The Committee understands the rationale for offering a course that provides general knowledge in history, sociology, etc., including Jewish studies. However, **the Committee suggests that a wider set of options be given to the students, and that Jewish Studies not count for 10% of the curriculum.** The Committee also noted that the alumni it spoke with could not converse

fluently in English (although the current students with whom the Committee met were highly fluent). **English fluency is a critical learning goal for all students in the program, necessary for achieving many of the complementary learning objectives discussed in this report.**

The syllabi the Committee received revealed that most of the texts were in Hebrew, which is understandable, and yet many of the lists seem to be dated. One solution would be to take advantage of the many classical texts which have been translated into Hebrew and that are published, e.g., by Shalem Institute, and of the many articles in the PS journal *Politika*, written by leading scholars in Israel. **The Committee recommends that the teachers update their syllabi.** In terms of potential improvements to the curriculum, several students mentioned they would appreciate a more global and comparative focus, additional professional internship opportunities, and courses in research methodology.

The Committee notes that there was an entire dimension to the program that did not appear in the SER. The Department teaches an army program that apparently enrolls around 30 cadets a year in a 3-year BA program. The number for the entire three years of the program appears to be around 50.

The Committee understands that because of the different levels, duplicate courses are given in the BA program, one set for the army cadets and another for the regular students. This is compounded by yet another level, that of students enrolled in the interdisciplinary program. Hence the Department teaches courses to three groups on different levels.

**The Committee recommends recruiting the best-performing students from the Interdisciplinary Program to the Department after the first or second semester.** This will not harm the Interdisciplinary program and the College financially because the Interdisciplinary program already has more students than CHE approves, so the College is under-budgeted for the number of students who study in this program. **The Committee also recommends integrating the different groups of students into the same courses, possibly with different sections.** The College leadership seemed to agree that this would free some lecturers who could then offer methodological courses (see "skills-based curriculum" below).

In order to recruit more faculty, the Department needs to enroll more students. The College and the Department believe that the best way to do this is to open an MA public policy program, which they feel would make the BA more attractive to students, who will see themselves continuing their studies in the College towards the MA. Regardless of the merits of this idea, **the Committee recommends that the Department consider several possible avenues for improving the Study Program and make it more attractive, so that more students will enroll.**

- (1) **Skills-based curriculum.** The students and alumni the Committee interviewed were unanimous in agreeing with the need for courses in research methods and scientific thinking. These could include quantitative and qualitative methods, computerized text analysis, survey data analysis, and so on, which could better prepare the students for the job market. Other top political science programs around Israel and the world are moving in this direction to help their graduates capture opportunities in the private and public sectors. The Department should advertise itself as providing these courses, and explain their importance in the knowledge of Contemporary Political Science, and as tools for life and job competency.

- (2) **A three-month summer Internship.** The Department could distinguish itself from other departments in Israel by offering a supervised three-month internship in one of the local municipalities around Ashkelon: Netivot, Sderot, Ofakim, Kiryat Gat, Ashdod, or one of the regional authorities. Internships could also be in other public and private organizations. They should be accompanied by an academic course, which would give the students and the lecturers credit, e.g. 4 points, and in which the students would meet every fortnight with the lecturer, to study local public policy and administration. They could also have a case study course in which the students write a paper on their Internship, and present it both in class and to the municipality itself. The latter would be attractive to the municipalities and other organizations, as they would benefit not only from the student's work but also from their academic reflections.
- (3) **Additional joint programs.** Beyond current links with Criminology and Sociology/Anthropology, the Committee strongly recommends that the Department explore other joint degrees with other departments in the College such as Economics and Computer Science, leveraging as much as possible the synergies within the institution to improve the skills that students need to get top jobs in Israel's knowledge economy.

The Department evaluated its overall performance in Study Program:

(1=unsatisfactory, 2=needs significant improvements, 3=needs minor improvements, 4=satisfactory, 5=highly satisfactory)

	1	2	3	4	5
				X	

The Evaluation Committee evaluated the Department's overall performance in Study Program:

	1	2	3	4	5
			X		

The Committee notes that improvements are required in the Study Program, and offers specific ways to achieve these.

### 3.4 Teaching and Learning Outcomes

Institutionally, the Quality Teaching and Learning Center of the College supports faculty on pedagogical issues. Faculty members regularly take part in the Center's workshops and approach their coaches for consultations. According to the SER, the College offers the training of current and new faculty 'to great extent' (score of 4), while techno-pedagogical support is offered 'mildly' (2). When queried about the discrepancy between these two modes of teaching support, the College leadership stressed that all classrooms boasted the most recent



technologies. The College leadership team promptly sent a video showcasing the technology available in the classroom. As the Committee could not visit the campus in person, the video was informative and showed that the College's technical infrastructure is of high quality. In the Committee's meeting with the Head of Department, Professor Ilan Greilsammer, when further queried upon this point, noted that this specific self-evaluation on techno-pedagogical support reflects his desire for faculty members to fully utilize and take full advantage of the College's excellent infrastructure. In this vein, **the Committee recommends that the Quality Teaching and Learning Center work closely with faculty members to ensure that they are trained in the use of all technology available for the classroom.**

The SER notes that current teaching regulations at the Academic College of Ashkelon and at the Department of Politics and Government are clear and transparent. Teachers are (or should be) fully aware of their teaching load in terms of both the number of courses and teaching hours appropriate to their status and grade, the number of days a faculty member needs to be present at the College, the required number of office hours, and the obligation to submit final grades by a set deadline.

The SER notes the Head's contribution to promoting teaching performance by directly visiting classes in session. However, the weakness of this approach is that the evaluation of teaching performance relies primarily on students and the Head, which are both highly subjective and do not appear to be balanced by peer review and self-assessment. **Moving forward, the Committee recommends that the teaching evaluation mechanism be improved with a Department-level (or even College-level) document that specifies evaluation criteria for teaching performance.** The Department could also adopt a practice of consultations with the Head to clarify these standards and to generally promote greater transparency in the evaluation of teaching performance.

Among the Committee's meetings with the College and Department leadership, the sessions with the students and alumni were the most impactful in demonstrating how many students, past and present, valued their teachers at the College. Students clearly link their achievements in learning with specific instructors that inspired them and instilled in them greater confidence. This in turn serves the students not only in their studies, but also on the job market. The Committee was fortunate to meet with students from several walks of life and at various life stages, from a 38-year-old single mother of two who just completed her degree while holding down a full-time job, to a young man in his twenties combining study in Political Science and Criminology with a part-time job and a passion for surfing. The faculty members shared a strong sense of mission in working for the College and felt rewarded as educators of new immigrants and other under-privileged groups in this neighborhood. Overall, the dynamic between students and teachers at Ashkelon is extremely positive and rewarding for both sides.

The SER identifies the Department's first intended learning outcome (ILO) as the acquisition of 'the largest possible knowledge on Politics,' inclusive of topic areas such as Government, Political History, Political Thought, and International Relations, among others. The specific goals of the major are to reach a 'good level' in 1) contextualization of knowledge; 2) praxis and technique; 3) critical thinking; 4) research and communication; 5) Initiative and planning; and 6) collaboration with other students. The Committee notes a major gap in the elaboration

of these goals, specifically to identify the pathways and processes for reaching them through the current curriculum. **The Committee recommends a Department-level document with a fully elaborated set of ILOs on these six components.**

The second learning outcome is identified as job placement following graduation. This is not an actual learning outcome, and while the goal is laudable, it should have been placed elsewhere in the Report.

According to the SER, the ILOs are reviewed twice a year. This is too frequent. **The Committee recommends drafting an ILO that would be in effect for at least one year and up to five years, to be reviewed annually by the Department.**

Among the areas for improvement identified in the SER, the Committee concurs most strongly with the need to improve English language training for students. The Committee’s meetings with current students and alumni showed significant variation in speaking ability in English, and this is likely to be even more pronounced in written work. **The Committee strongly recommends more rigorous and extensive training in speaking and writing in English for students.** This may take the form of a placement test at the time of entry for students before entering the College and required courses to provide remedial English language training where needed, and courses devoted fully to writing.

The Department evaluated its overall performance in Teaching and Learning Outcomes:

(1=unsatisfactory, 2=needs significant improvements, 3=needs minor improvements, 4=satisfactory, 5=highly satisfactory)

	1	2	3	4	5
				X	

The Evaluation Committee evaluated the Department's overall performance in Teaching and Learning Outcomes:

	1	2	3	4	5
			X		

The Committee found that more has to be done in order to make the ILOs clear to faculty and students, starting by writing a Department-level document with a fully elaborated set of ILOs on the various Department’s goals and objectives.

### 3.5 Students

The Committee spoke with several current students as well as two alumni. The consensus was that the students were profoundly grateful for the small class sizes and close interpersonal mentoring relationships they had developed with faculty.

All students discharged from the army who are accepted to the College benefit from a scholarship from the state (no tuition fees for the first year, and reduced tuition in the second year). The Committee understands that about 75% of the students receive some kind of financial assistance (scholarships) during their second and third years in the College. The College claims to have an active policy of accepting disabled students and students with special needs. Most of the students come from the nearby towns, kibbutzim, and moshavim. Although the Committee did not see any statistics, the staff and the General Director indicated that most of these students are 1<sup>st</sup> generation to higher education.

One challenge that the College and the Department face is the continuous security threat and the many times during which the students cannot attend the campus due to clashes around the Gaza Strip. To help the students cope with the situation the College offers psychological services at the Dean of Students' office.

Since increasing the size of the undergraduate student body is a central concern, the Committee investigated, as much as possible, how admission standards are set. The faculty insisted that the Department had high standards which produced high-quality students, and that they were unwilling to compromise on that tradeoff. Further research, however, suggested that the admissions standards of the Department were not, in fact, higher than other units in the College with very large numbers of undergraduates, e.g. Criminology, and that nearly all students applying to the undergraduate program were accepted each year. While the Committee was deeply impressed with the respect and warmth expressed by the faculty for the existing students, it remains unclear why the Department could not attract more students of similar quality. **Rather than lowering admission standards, the Committee would recommend taking full advantage of the rules for probationary acceptance of up to 10% of the student body below the minimum cutoff.** In addition, consideration should be given to adopting a "holistic" approach to evaluating the applications of prospective students (which may include specific challenges which a study may have overcome, unique skills, etc.), which could result in increase in the number of students applying to and receiving admission. It is important to identify "diamonds in the rough" – students who did not perform well in high school but may now be sufficiently motivated and skilled to succeed in the Department.

**The Committee suggests that the College and Department consider offering a preparatory course in Introduction to Political Science, conducted in the summer, to which students with slightly lower than the current minimum cutoff would be accepted.** Successful students who pass the course exam with a mark that would be decided by the Department would then be accepted into the program. Their first year may be slightly easier as they will have done the Introduction to PS course in the summer. The cost of this course could be covered by the fees that the students pay for participation in it. The Department Head and the College's leadership seemed to welcome this suggestion.

The unit currently does not admit MA students, though it would very much like to begin a graduate program in Public Administration. While evaluating this initiative is not within the

scope of the current report, the Committee feels that much could be done within the current undergraduate program to improve outcomes for students even without introducing an MA program. Ideas along these lines have been mentioned in other sections of this report (Study Programs and Diversity).

The Committee did not receive any systematic information about professional outcomes for alumni seeking employment after graduation. The alumni with whom the Committee spoke were impressive and were working in banking and accounting. They praised the Department mostly for its focus on interpersonal mentoring and individual advice about the job market. However, not much was conveyed about exactly how many undergraduates went on to pursue professional Master’s degrees. The Department Head and faculty claimed as many as 50% of their graduates pursued secondary degrees, which was encouraging, **but better documentation and tracking are needed.**

Presently there is no formal organization of alumni. The alumni could be very helpful in two weaker aspects of the Department, namely, student recruitment and job placement. Particularly in job placement, alumni could serve as mentors on a one-on-one basis and identify internships and regular positions. The alumni were very enthusiastic about their experience in the BA program, and an alumni association would sustain their connection with the Department and the College.

Recruitment of students to the Department demands both improved marketing and a broader presentation of the professional utility of a political science degree. Right now, the degree is presented largely as an avenue to positions in public administration. **The Committee recommends expanding to include positions in the not-for-profit sector and the private sector.** The Department should also consider establishing contacts with businesses in the South (especially high-tech) to enhance job placement. This can even be tailored specifically into third-year research seminars, to raise questions with political or social content that the high-tech firms might like answered.

Additionally, the College has hired a psychologist if students need counseling. All complaints are handled through the Dean of Students office. It also has a Career Center, holding approximately 15 job fairs each year.

The Department evaluated its overall performance in Students:

(1=unsatisfactory, 2=needs significant improvements, 3=needs minor improvements, 4=satisfactory, 5=highly satisfactory)

	1	2	3	4	5
				X	

The Evaluation Committee evaluated the Department's overall performance in Students:

	1	2	3	4	5
			X		

The Committee agrees that the existing student body is satisfied with the program, but it is also extremely important to expand the program to include a larger cohort. The primary advice offered here is for the Department to think more creatively about attracting excellent students, including by taking advantage of rules about probationary acceptance of those who do not meet the cutoff, and by offering a preparatory course that can help undergraduates get up to speed to succeed in more advanced classes. Finally, better tracking and documentation about the performance of alumni both on the job market and in pursuing higher academic degrees is needed.

### **3.6 Academic Faculty and Human Resources**

The Department of Politics and Government consists of six faculty members. Aside from the Head, all have received their doctorates at Israeli universities, two at Bar-Ilan University, two at Hebrew University, and one at Ben Gurion University. Their professional training has been appropriate for the Department.

All are active scholars, publishing in a variety of outlets, and are devoted to their teaching. Their ability to produce quality publications is impressive. The College provides all faculty with 15,000 NIS for research, English editing, and attending conferences, although, according to the SER, faculty are prohibited from attending conferences abroad during the semester. The Committee received contradictory information on the possibility of reduced teaching loads for those actively involved in a research project. The President said there can be a reduction of teaching load, while the SER indicated there was no such reduction. Sabbaticals for research are provided by the College on a case-by-case basis.

The impressive research orientation of the faculty is even more remarkable because all carry heavy teaching loads (for lecturers and senior lecturers, 12 hours per week and, for the single professor, 10 hours per week).

In addition to their teaching and research, the faculty are deeply involved in advising and mentoring. Students recounted how important the faculty have been to them outside the classroom. All faculty have also been active in Israeli and international conferences, as well. It is worth noting that the level of collegiality and companionship in the Department is remarkable.

Given the relatively small number of students in the Department, the number of faculty is adequate to the teaching needs. Indeed, if there were an increase in the number of students, instructors would switch their teaching outside the Department to Departmental courses.

Coverage of the various areas of Political Science is limited by the small number of faculty members. Nonetheless, the faculty does cover aspects of the main subfields of the discipline: international relations, comparative politics (including several regions of the world), political

theory, and Israeli politics. They have managed to incorporate the present upheaval in Israel into their classes through various theories and concepts in political science.

After a distinguished career at Bar-Ilan University, the Head came to Ashkelon Academic College in 2017 to help found the Department and has served as its head for the last six years. He has established good working relationships with both the College administration and the Department faculty. The Head has considerable autonomy and authority. Elsewhere in this report (section 3.1), the Committee recommends more shared governance.

Faculty meetings are held once every two months and appear to serve as a committee of the whole, without other Department committees. The Head has also established a periodic seminar on issues such as religion and state, open to faculty, students, and community members.

While there has only been one Head in the Department thus far, the appointment of the Head seems to be top-down by the College leadership. There does not seem to be a regular procedure or appointment process in place for the rotation of the Head. **The Committee recommends such a procedure be instituted.**

Because of its small size, the Department has one administrative coordinator, which seems to work well.

While there is no immediate plan to recruit new faculty, the existing recruitment procedures were of concern to the Committee. There is no formal or systematic procedure for hiring, including the lack of a call for applications. This process is ripe for bias and manipulation. It makes it harder to reach the goals of the whole College and the Department, if hiring is controlled by the personal connections and preferences of the Head or the College administration. This is a very outdated way of conducting hiring.

There does exist a College-wide document on promotion – “Criteria for Advancement in the Institution.” It specifies how faculty are to initiate the promotion procedure (through the Department Head, or, in special cases, directly with the Rector). The procedure begins with an assessment by the Appointments Committee. For associate and full professor promotions, the final decision is by the CHE.

Teaching is a key criterion for promotion. Candidates should have a grade of +4 in their student evaluations. Research production is also a principal criterion for promotion. There is a rather formalistic set of criteria in the document, e.g., a book with a reputable publisher equals 3-5 articles (elsewhere in the document, 3-4 articles), a single edited book equals two articles, a co-edited book equals one article. Six articles, most of which are in English, are needed for promotion to senior lecturer, and so on. **The Committee recommends a more nuanced system of assessing research that takes account of the subfield of the candidate as well as the quality of the article or book.**

The Committee understands that hiring new faculty will not be possible before expanding the undergraduate program substantially. However, when this is possible, the focus should be on hiring faculty who can continue to expand the skills-based curriculum in quantitative research methods including, for example, cutting-edge techniques in policy evaluation, statistical analysis of survey and administrative data, computer-assisted text analysis, and so on.

The Department evaluated its overall performance in Academic Faculty and Human Resources:

(1=unsatisfactory, 2=needs significant improvements, 3=needs minor improvements, 4=satisfactory, 5=highly satisfactory)

	1	2	3	4	5
				X	

The Evaluation Committee evaluated the Department's overall performance in Academic Faculty and Human Resources:

	1	2	3	4	5
				X	

The Committee concurs with the Department's performance in "Academic Faculty and Human Resources".

### 3.7 Diversity

Diversity is at the center of Ashkelon's mission to provide higher education for the residents in peripheral areas in Southern Israel, and to train students to enter the professions that are needed in the region. Among the students at the College, Ashkelon seems to be successful. According to the Assistant to the CEO, 20% of students in the College come from minority groups. This includes 300 Arabs, of which 200 are Bedouin, 200 Israelis from Ethiopian origin, and 300 Haredim. The College also attracts students with disabilities, which comprise 8% of the entire student population. Ashkelon has an infrastructure that helps it attract and serve students from diverse backgrounds, including stipends for disadvantaged minorities.

The Department shares Ashkelon's vision and considers itself "a model of diversity" (SER, p. 65). Yet, there is room for improvement. The College administration, the Head of the Department of Politics and Government, and the faculty all confirmed that the Department has hardly any Arab students, as they are attracted to programs with clearer paths to vocational opportunities in Israel, including Nursing (>300 students) and Criminology (>800 students). However, new immigrants to Israel constitute a large part of their student community. The assistant to the CEO also claimed diversity on other dimensions (gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability). The faculty, finally, pointed out that the Department served many students from disadvantaged socioeconomic strata. No exact numbers could be provided to sustain these claims as the College does not, or is unable to, track them. Without clear data, however, evaluating and improving student and faculty diversity is impossible.

Gender equality is poor, at least regarding to the faculty (only one out of the six faculty members is female). Faculty and students reported good diversity along gender (~50% women) in the student body. However, the Committee was unable to confirm this impression for the lack of data. The Department admits that it is lagging behind on gender regarding its faculty and could perform better on other diversity dimensions. It hopes to improve its performance by increasing undergraduate enrollments and, consequently, hiring additional faculty. **The Committee recommends that future hiring should prioritize addressing the gender imbalance, but also must focus on attracting Arab and other minority scholars who can serve as role models to attract a more diverse undergraduate student body.**

The Committee suggests a few ways to improve the ethno-religious diversity in the student body beyond recruiting more students. First, **the Committee recommends that the Department should look at other programs that have been more successful in attracting minority students to identify best practices.** For instance, what is Criminology doing to attract Arab students that Political Science is not doing? It was suggested that academic standards might be lower than in Politics and Government, though the admissions criteria are similar, if not identical, with a minimum of 80 points. Second, **the Committee recommends that the Department think carefully about how its undergraduate curriculum could be modified and improved to provide concrete professional skills that can attract Arab and other disadvantaged minorities.** The Committee made two specific suggestions in the Study Program section for improving skills-based curriculum that should be repeated.

(1) The Department could offer more research-focused methods courses, especially those linked to basic statistics, data analytics, policy evaluation, text analysis, comparative methods, and so on. This advice could also extend to building a joint degree between the Department and other units such as Computer Science and Economics.

(2) The Department could enhance internships beyond the current offerings to include working in municipal public administration roles and in other organizations that might lead to future professional opportunities after graduation. Building such professional connections, especially where alumni of the program already work, could solve many of the challenges the Department faces simultaneously.

The committee was impressed with existing efforts to create an inclusive environment for those from the periphery of Israel and for Jewish Israelis of various regional and ethnic backgrounds. The program for training the army helps educate soldiers who may have struggled in high school. This is a large program which is challenging to run.

The Department evaluated its overall performance in Diversity:

(1=unsatisfactory, 2=needs significant improvements, 3=needs minor improvements, 4=satisfactory, 5=highly satisfactory)



	1	2	3	4	5
			X		

The Evaluation Committee evaluated the Department's overall performance in Diversity:

	1	2	3	4	5
			X		

The Committee agrees with the Department that more should be done in this area, especially with regard to the faculty members.

### 3.8 Research

The College regards itself as first and foremost a teaching institution, and the teaching load of the lecturers is high. The lecturers seem to accept this and say that they manage to do research nevertheless. Research is important for promotion. Two of the lecturers (including the Head of Department) are already professors, and one is in the process of promotion from senior lecturer to associate professor.

The lecturers' research is in varied fields, including politics in France, social issues in Israel, China and North Africa, public policy, the role of political scientists in the civic education debate in Israel, and religion and politics.

The Committee is under the impression that when research is evaluated, not enough emphasis is given to the quality and impact of the publication. The lecturers receive a modest, yet significant sum for research, which should cover travel to conferences as well. But, according to the Head of Department, members of staff do not have enough time to prepare grant proposals, to compete for ISF grants, and the like. Also, according to the SER, the Rector does not approve of traveling to conferences during term time, which limits the opportunities to present one's work abroad. The Committee understands that these circumstances make it very difficult to publish in top journals. **The Committee encourages the College and the Department to at least re-consider this limitation on traveling and to prioritize publications in prestigious journals and books with prestigious publishers.**

To improve conditions conducive to faculty research, the Committee has the following recommendations:

**Build real-world research into class projects and assignments, particularly research relating to the Southern Periphery, including collection of data, interviewing, and more.** This could help improve the fit between faculty research and teaching and also show the relevance of research to students.

**Develop a formal postdoctoral teaching program.** In such a program, recruiting postdocs from abroad and Israeli universities would be cost-effective (as it is a

scholarship to help these postdocs develop skills for a future career, it is tax-free). It is also a boon for those finishing PhDs and not yet absorbed into the labor market, a source to staff department courses, and exposure of students (and other faculty) to the newest research in the field of political science.

**Increase sabbaticals for faculty engaging in research.** The College should consider expanding the number of sabbaticals, which is very effective in providing the time necessary for cultivating, executing, and writing up research.

**Organize a writing retreat for faculty.** The Department should allot money and time for faculty to get together 1-2 days per year to write and discuss their writing.

The Department evaluated its overall performance in Research:

(1=unsatisfactory, 2=needs significant improvements, 3=needs minor improvements, 4=satisfactory, 5=highly satisfactory)

	1	2	3	4	5
			X		

The Evaluation Committee evaluated the Department's overall performance in Research:

	1	2	3	4	5
			X		

The Committee agrees with the SER that more must be done to sustain research in the Department.

### 3.9 Infrastructure

Due to security issues, the Committee was not able to visit the campus as planned. However, the virtual tour left a very good impression. In addition, two of the Committee members who reside in Israel visited the campus a week later.

The Department does not seem to suffer from any space constraints. The Committee was impressed by how well the classrooms were equipped. The infrastructure was as good as depicted in the video. The library is very attractive, although at the time the Committee visited, it was remarkably empty of students.

The faculty members were enthusiastic about the library. Students had no complaints about accessing study and research materials, and librarians assist faculty and familiarize the students with resources for their class research. The library appears to make good use of digital technologies to provide them with access and assist the teaching and learning process.

According to the General Director, there are absolutely no resource limitations on the library, and the chief librarian reinforced this by saying that they have all the journal subscriptions they want and a request for buying a book has never been turned down. **The Committee recommends obtaining political science texts in Arabic and providing library assistance in Arabic.**

The College’s support for teaching is noteworthy. The classrooms are equipped at a high level, with all classrooms having a sophisticated smart podium. The Quality Center for Teaching and Learning helps in instruction. An international center helps with student participation in trips abroad, such as a recent cohort that went to Rome. There were plans for an interesting exchange program that were negotiated with Aix-en-Provence, but the pandemic prevented this coming to fruition.

The Department evaluated its overall performance in Infrastructure:

(1=unsatisfactory, 2=needs significant improvements, 3=needs minor improvements, 4=satisfactory, 5=highly satisfactory)

	1	2	3	4	5
					X

The Evaluation Committee evaluated the Department's overall performance in Infrastructure:

	1	2	3	4	5
					X

The Committee concurs with the Department’s performance in “Infrastructure”.

## Section 4: Recommendations

### Essential

The College and the Department should enhance their efforts to recruit more students to the Department. Some alternative ways of attracting more students can include taking advantage of the rules for probationary acceptance of up to 10% of the student body or offering a preparatory course in Introduction to Political Science.

### Important

The Department should work with the College administration to conduct an ongoing process of data gathering and data analysis to better understand the causes of its primary objective of increasing student numbers for its BA program. As a part of these efforts, it should examine other programs that have been more successful in attracting minority students to identify best practices.

The Department should revise the study program. Syllabi should be updated to include relevant texts and material. Further, the Department should consider the following changes: offer a wider set of options for courses that provide general knowledge in history, sociology, etc., instead of focusing mainly on Jewish Studies; add skills-based courses, and summer internships.

English fluency should become a critical learning goal for all students in the program, and the Study program should provide the framework for this fluency.

The Department should draft a fully elaborated set of the department's ILOs, which should be in effect for at least one year and up to five years. These ILOs should be reviewed annually by the Department.

The Department should consider spreading responsibilities more broadly among the faculty in Department management.

Clear procedures should be put in place for the appointment and rotation of the Head of Department, as well as for the recruitment of faculty.

In recruiting new faculty members, the College and Department should prioritize addressing the gender imbalance, but also focus on attracting Arab and other minority scholars who can serve as role models to attract a more diverse undergraduate student body.

## **Desirable**

The College should ensure that the Quality Teaching and Learning Center works closely with faculty members, so that they are trained in the use of all technology available for the classroom.

The teaching evaluation mechanism should be improved with a Department-level (or even College-level) document that specifies the evaluation criteria for teaching performance.

The College should adopt a more nuanced system of assessing research that takes account of the subfield of the candidate, as well as the quality of the article or book.

To improve the fit between faculty research and teaching, the Department and faculty members should consider building real world research into class projects and assignments, including collection of data, interviewing, and more.

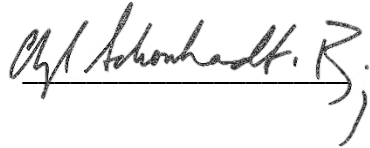
The College should consider developing a formal postdoctoral teaching program, which could contribute to the Department, to the postdoc trainees, and to the students.

The College should increase sabbaticals for faculty engaging in research. The Department should allot money and time for faculty to meet for a 1-2 days "retreat" to write and discuss their writing.

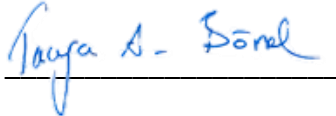
The College should Acquire political science texts in Arabic to the library, and provide library assistance in Arabic.

**Signed by:**

Prof. Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey  
*Committee Chair*

  
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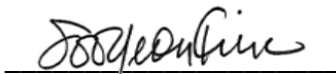
Prof. Dr. Tanja A. Börzel

  
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Prof. Joel Migdal

  
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Prof. Soo Yeon Kim

  
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Prof. Avner de Shalit

  
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Prof. Nicholas Valentino

  
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## Appendix I: Letter of Appointment



March 2023

Prof. Nicholas Valentino,  
Department of Political Science,  
University of Michigan  
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 a member of the Council for Higher Education's Committee for the Evaluation of **Political Science and International Relations** departments. In addition to yourself, the composition of the Committee will be as follows: Prof. Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey (chair), Prof. Tanja A. Börzel, Prof. Soo Yeon Kim, Prof. Joel Migdal, Prof. James Perry, and Prof. Avner de Shalit.

Ms. Pe'er Baris-Barnea and Ms. Anat Haina will be the coordinators of the Committee.

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

Sincerely,

Prof. Edit Tshuva,  
Vice Chair,  
The Council for Higher Education (CHE)

*Enclosures:* Appendix to the Appointment Letter of Evaluation Committees

cc: Sigal Mordoch, Acting Deputy Director-General for QA, CHE  
Ms. Anat Haina, Committee Coordinator