



EVALUATION OF PHILOSOPHY STUDIES GENERAL REPORT

COMMITTEE FOR THE EVALUATION OF PHILOSOPHY
DEPARTMENTS IN ISRAEL

MARCH 202

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 programmes in the field of Philosophy in Israel.

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

- The Hebrew University
- Bar-Ilan University
- Ben-Gurion University

1.3 To undertake the evaluation, the Vice Chair of the CHE appointed a Committee consisting of¹:

- [Prof. Nicholas Southwood](#) – Chair
- [Prof. Tamar Szabó Gendler](#)
- [Prof. Eli Friedlander](#)
- [Prof. John Hyman](#)
- [Prof. Simon May](#)

Ms Keren Hrushev served as the Coordinator of the Committee on behalf of the CHE, supported by Sahar Friedman.

1.4 The evaluation process was conducted following 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 programmes in Philosophy.
- Conduct site visits at five institutions participating in the evaluation process.
- Submit to the CHE an individual report on each academic unit and study programme participating in the evaluation.
- Set out the committee's findings and recommendations for each study programme.
- Submit to the CHE a general report regarding the evaluated field of study within the Israeli higher education system.

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

- 1.5 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 on and explained in discussions with senior management, faculty members, students, and alumni during each one-day visit to each institution.
- 1.6 In undertaking this work, the Committee considered matters of the international context, research, quality assurance, quality enhancement, and capacity building.

Section 2: Recommendations

The Committee is grateful to the administration, faculty, staff, students, and alumni of the three Universities we visited and reviewed: Hebrew University, Bar-Ilan University, and Ben-Gurion University. Each Department had devoted considerable effort in advance of our visit to preparing a thoughtful, thorough, and candid self-evaluation; each made its faculty and a representative set of students and alumni available for us to meet; and each University gave us access to its senior administrators (e.g. President, Rector, Vice Rector). Particular commendation is due to the secretarial staff at each of the Universities, who managed the logistics of our visits with hospitality and grace, even as a new semester was beginning.

Each department we visited seemed highly dedicated and professional, committed to the pursuit of world-class research by their faculty and to the rigorous training of their students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. A general tone of seriousness, generosity, and institutionality characterised each of the programmes and the Universities in which they sit. Against a global and local backdrop of declining Humanities enrollments, financial uncertainty, and political unrest, each university displayed commitment, ingenuity, and resourcefulness in pursuing its core mission of creating, preserving, and transmitting knowledge. This was true at the level of the University leadership, the School/Faculty/Division heads, the Department Chairs, and the individual faculty. Each Department has made excellent recent hires due to undertaking thorough and competitive international searches. We commend the Departments for their use of best recruitment practices.

The most striking feature of each of the Departments that we visited was the combination of its size and its quality. Every Department we saw was small – between half and two-thirds the size of comparable Departments at Anglo-American universities – but, despite this limited size, each offered an impressively wide range of courses and produced an impressively large and high-quality body of research. In short, all the Departments we visited are to be commended for “punching above their weight,” given their limited scale.

As an international set of reviewers from various countries in the Anglo-American world and one Israeli, we were struck by a common set of constraints and opportunities. These include:

Language constraints: Because Hebrew is the first or second language of Israeli high school students, with English as a second language (for Hebrew speakers) or third language (for Arabic speakers), universities are constrained both in their hiring of faculty and in their assignment of texts in classes. With regard to hiring: faculty who are hired must either speak or be willing to learn Hebrew. This constrains the range of faculty available for positions in the Israeli academy. Concerning the assignment of texts: in introductory (and even in mid-level) classes, texts must be selected with the recognition that students' English may be limited. (Fewer philosophical texts – both historical and contemporary – have been professionally translated into Hebrew than, for example, into the major European and East Asian languages.)

Budgeting framework: It is our understanding that most budgeting (of faculty slots, student stipends, and other departmental resources) and most counting (of, e.g. enrollments and course offerings) is done on a year-by-year basis rather than a rolling-average basis. This sort of accounting can constrain strategic planning and smart deployment of resources. We encourage the CHE, the universities, the divisions and the departments to employ - wherever possible - a system of 3- or 5-year rolling averages in determining allocations and responsibilities.

Declining Humanities enrollments: As in many countries, Humanities enrollments in Israel are on the decline. And as in many countries, first-generation and low-income students are particularly unlikely to pursue study in this area. This challenge is compounded by the relative rigidity of the Israeli system, which follows a European rather than American model of specialisation (students apply to University to study a particular subject, and Universities are divided into relatively independent Schools and Faculties) so that students would not be exposed to disciplines outside their particular choice of majors. Below, we suggest several ways to mitigate some of these challenges by offering cross-disciplinary or cross-divisional degree programs and encouraging Departments to offer engaging but serious courses for non-majors, particularly those in their first or second year of BA study.

Affordable tuition: Unlike American universities, tuition at Israeli universities is relatively affordable for mid-career adults. Because of the geographic concentration of Israel's population, many people live within commuting distance of one of the country's universities. Culturally, there is an attitude of curiosity and respect for learning among portions of the

population. As a result, a significant number of adults return at the middle or end of their careers to study at the MA level – sometimes in the same field they pursued at the BA level, sometimes in a different area. The flexibility shown by the Departments we visited in accommodating these students through creative scheduling and other adjustments is to be commended.

Student demographics: Compared to students in most countries, Israeli college students begin their BA training at a later stage of life – always post-Army, often post-travel, and sometimes post-marriage and post-childbirth. As a result, the paradigmatic characteristics that epitomise the “storybook” American and British college experience are mainly absent from the Israeli content: on-campus dormitory or fraternity/sorority living; a robust structure of student clubs and college-based athletic teams; an assumption by faculty that undergraduate students are largely responsibility-free. (This assumption is often false in the American and British context as well – but it is part of the lore of the collegiate experience, as can be seen in numerous literary and cinematic representations.) As with mid-career MA students, BA students who are engaged in parenting and other caregiving activities may, of necessity, pursue their studies in a part-time manner. Again, each of the schools we visited is to be commended for providing appropriate accommodations to students who face such circumstances.

No structured system of cooperation: Given the small size of the country – both geographically and in terms of population – the Committee was repeatedly struck by the absence of formal and informal systems of collaboration across University lines. In the pages below, we offer some specific recommendations for the ways in which Departments of Philosophy might collaborate within and beyond their Universities. In making these recommendations, we are struck by their similarity to those made by the History Visiting Committee in its 2022 report (see che.org.il).

The remainder of the report will summarise the Committee’s specific observations and recommendations with regard to: 1) academic program; 2) student enrolments; 3) diversity, 4) language training, 5) internationalisation, 6) infrastructure, and 7) follow-up and implementation.

1. Academic Program

As noted, the Philosophy Departments in Israel are comparatively small as measured by the number of faculty. The largest of the three Departments we visited (HUJI) has only 50-60% of the FTE count of Anglophone Departments with comparable numbers of students and reputations as centres of excellence in Philosophy. This limits the areas where Departments can offer teaching, mentoring, and supervision. Indeed, all three Departments we visited reported finding it challenging to offer a sufficiently broad range of courses to provide a comprehensive education in Philosophy and satisfy their students' curiosity. Each Department must make careful choices in terms of how they balance the depth and breadth of coverage. Moreover, there are some conspicuous gaps across all three Departments we visited, such as the Philosophy of Language and Medieval Islamic Philosophy.

To preserve the quality and sustainability of teaching and research, it is essential that Departments at least *maintain* their current size. Retirements should be replaced in a timely – even anticipatory – fashion. While it is not always possible to predict when faculty members will move to other Universities in Israel or overseas or be obliged to resign because of ill health, retirements are predictable. It is essential to ensure that hires are made in good time to smooth numbers. It would also be highly desirable to look for resources that might allow one or more Universities to create a post in Medieval Islamic Philosophy, preferably in an institution with an existing strength in medieval Jewish Philosophy (whether or not that strength is located in the Philosophy Department). Identifying the most suitable homes for such positions would require discussion among the nation's various Philosophy Departments, creating a backdrop for similar collaborations in the future regarding additional fields.

The Committee was struck by the extent to which philosophers in Israel are overburdened by excessive teaching and supervision loads. This often leaves inadequate time for research and carries with it the real risk of burnout. We recognise that a nationwide reduction in mandatory teaching hours is unlikely. In this light, institutions must find ways of mitigating its deleterious effects. One mechanism might be for institutions to consistently count graduate supervision towards the fulfilment of faculty teaching expectations, a practice that we found to be inconsistently implemented. We also observed significant differences in the

flexibility with which institutions allow academics to discharge their obligations to fulfil their mandatory academic teaching hours.

There are relatively few joint activities and collaborations across different Philosophy Departments. Such actions and collaboration provide obvious benefits, especially to small Departments. An obvious example includes the cross-enrollment of students across University boundaries. We suggest that at the PhD and MA levels and perhaps also at the BA level, a norm should develop whereby students from one Israeli Philosophy Department are permitted – even encouraged – to take courses at other Israeli Philosophy Departments and earn full credit. Particularly in subfields where faculty expertise is distributed differently across the Departments, this would allow Israeli students, in general, to benefit from the national presence of expertise in a broader range of fields, permit a critical-mass enrollment in courses that assume prerequisites, and provide faculty with the opportunity to offer courses in areas where they sit at the cutting edge of world-wide understanding. Another example is collaborative teaching between departments. We were particularly impressed by a course on Theism and Atheism, which will be co-taught by faculty at Bar Ilan and the HU. (Both faculty will receive full credit for teaching the course, and each will take responsibility for marking work by their own University's students.) Such collaborations might take place across and among Universities in Israel or even across international lines. Faculty should be encouraged to create – and supported in the execution of – collaborations of this kind.

Yet another example is collaboration in supporting international visitors, both short-term and long-term. It would clearly be beneficial for Departments to collaborate with one another in bringing academic visitors to Israel. In its simplest form, this might involve a “grand tour” structure (a la New Zealand) where a faculty member from abroad gives a series of academic talks and seminars over the course of a week, spending a day or so at each of several Universities. In more elaborate form, it might involve longer-term visitors, who might come for a period of a month, a semester, or an academic year, or a recurrent set of visits over several years – again, offering seminars, lectures, and intellectual presence at multiple Departments during their visits.

As already noted, all the Departments we visited face challenges due to the particular demographics of the Israeli student population, particularly the fact that Jewish students begin their undergraduate studies after army service; and often combine studies with full-

time work and family obligations, partly for this reason. Some universities – BGU, for example – largely serve a fairly traditional undergraduate population. Providing academic/social opportunities outside of class helps build a sense of intellectual community. Others – BIU, for example – serve a wider range of learners: some in their 20s, some mid-career, some post-retirement. Many students, especially MA students, are studying alongside work or caring responsibilities, leaving only limited hours for their studies. In such a case, the decision to offer an MA programme that meets only 1.5 days per week is an important mechanism for responding to student needs. Recognising that it is beneficial for students to complete their degrees in a timely fashion, it is nonetheless important to offer some flexibility in terms of the completion period – for example, allowing students to spend three years rather than two to complete the MA.

In all the Universities we visited, considerable energies are being expended to reach students outside the Philosophy Departments. One example is cross-disciplinary programs, which have been created or are in the process of being built in all three institutions. Several Universities already offer a degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE), and Bar Ilan is currently awaiting approval from the CHE for an additional program in this area. Across the various universities, other combined programs should also be considered, depending on the university's existing strengths: for example, Philosophy, Psychology and Economics; Philosophy and AI; or Philosophy, Linguistics and Computation. In addition, we suggest that each University should provide structured programmes wherein students can pursue practical study alongside a Humanities degree, leaving them with a legible certificate of their marketable skills at the end of their BA programme. (Such opportunities might help to attract first-generation and low-income students, for whom straightforward entry into the workforce post-college is a priority.) Joint majors in Philosophy and Law offer one such option, but others should be developed. For example, providing a structured programme in which students pursue a BA in Philosophy while training for a high-school level teaching certificate, or – as at Bar Ilan – a programme where students pursue a structured programme in Project Management alongside a BA in the field of their choice. Such programmes might be developed in conjunction with leaders in the private and public sectors.

Finally, Philosophy Departments should continue offering Philosophy courses to students enrolled in other Humanities Departments and other Faculties, both existing courses

primarily designed for students taking Philosophy as a Major and new courses designed specifically for Natural Sciences, Medicine, or Social Sciences students. To be sure, this presents challenges. First, because the skill of reading philosophical texts and writing philosophical prose is acquired over time and through practice, classes directed at mixed groups of students – BA and MA students, Philosophy and non-Philosophy students – can be challenging to “pitch”. Conversely, there is a risk that courses explicitly directed at non-majors may be “thin” regarding their content and/or expectations.

To help navigate these and other challenges, we suggest that faculty should be provided with the encouragement and resources to develop rigorous yet relatable programmes of study that will benefit non-majors as thinkers, citizens, and human beings, on topics from Philosophy of Physics, to Environmental Ethics, to Nationalism and Justice. At each University, the academic governing body should consider requiring (or recommending) a certain distribution of courses across schools/disciplines for the BA, regardless of a student’s major. For example, students majoring in the Natural Sciences might be expected to take a certain number or range of Humanities and/or Social Sciences courses, and vice versa. Or all students might be required to take a (certain number of) course(s) that requires a particular kind of writing work or quantitative reasoning (akin to “distribution requirements” at American universities.)

Finally, a regrettable feature of at least many of the Philosophy Departments in Israel is that there does not appear to be a strong cohort or sense of community among the students, either among undergraduates or (which is even more surprising) among MA and PhD students. Among the three Departments we visited, Ben Gurion stood out as an impressive exception in this regard, characterised by a very strong sense of community among Philosophy students. Students often meet formally and informally in smaller or larger groups to discuss their work and exchange ideas in philosophy. It is hard to exaggerate the positive contribution these kinds of meetings and the relationships between students they foster can play in a philosophical education at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The faculty also plays an active role in cultivating and encouraging it - via the organisation of, and attendance at, the regular “Philosophy club;” and their support for various forms of student innovation. The committee believes that helping to create a sense of community among the students by encouraging them to form discussion groups, Philosophy clubs, and other fora for discussion

and collaboration should be a priority for all Philosophy Departments in Israel, and that some modest resources should be devoted to encouraging such modes of self-organisation. It must be borne in mind that the forms that make most sense will doubtless vary from institution. For example, evening activities may not be practicable in the case of Departments with older students, those with caring responsibilities, or those who live elsewhere.

Recommendation (essential): All three Departments must at least maintain their current FTE.

Recommendation (essential): Retirements must be replaced in a timely – even anticipatory – fashion.

Recommendation (essential): Institutions must consistently count graduate supervision towards the fulfilment of faculty teaching expectations.

Recommendation (essential): Institutions must allow academics flexibility in how they discharge their obligations to teach their minimum number of mandatory academic teaching hours.

Recommendation (important): Institutions should support and encourage joint activities and coordination across Departments, including but not limited to a) cross-enrollment of students across University boundaries; b) co-teaching between Departments; and c) collaboration in supporting international visitors, both short-term and long-term.

Recommendation (important): There should be a concerted effort to hire a scholar in medieval Islamic philosophy in at least one of these institutions.

Recommendation (important): Universities should support and encourage cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary programmes and degrees, both for cross-disciplinary academic programmes and programmes allowing students to pursue practical training alongside a Humanities degree.

Recommendation (important): Universities should support and encourage Philosophy Departments to offer Philosophy courses to students enrolled in other Humanities

Departments and other Faculties, both existing courses primarily designed for students taking Philosophy as a Major and new courses explicitly designed for, say, students in the Natural Sciences, Medicine, or the Social Sciences. This must include resources and incentives to enable the development of such programmes.

Recommendation (important): Universities should recognise the extra-classroom needs of students in developing programming – both course-related and departmental. Departments must be given the freedom and flexibility to develop programming that best meets the needs of their particular population.

Recommendation (important): Universities should offer some flexibility in terms of the period of completion – for example, allowing students to spend three years rather than two to complete the MA.

Recommendation (important): Institutions should make available resources to help create and foster a community among students in Philosophy, including by setting up discussion groups, Philosophy clubs, and other fora for discussion and collaboration, especially within those Departments where this is more difficult to achieve.

2. Student enrolments

Whilst there are significant variations, the numbers of students enrolling in Philosophy Departments are generally relatively small and have declined since 2009, although not in every case to the same extent as numbers in the Humanities as a whole. Institutions have responded to this challenge in different ways. One common approach is to encourage students in other Departments and other faculties to take courses in Philosophy - either courses that broaden their education and satisfy their curiosity or courses that complement their main programme of study (e.g. Philosophy of Science or Bioethics). The Committee regards this as a welcome development, though, as already noted, one that must be implemented with care.

There are a number of further ways in which the decline in numbers might be addressed. First, by introducing new programmes of study as well as new courses of the latter kind. Second, by addressing the lack of diversity in the faculty and student bodies in the ways recommended below in section 3. Third, by more effectively communicating the value of philosophy to high school students, to the professional communities that have particular reasons to be interested in specific areas of Philosophy (e.g. Medical, hi tech), and to society in general, especially by means of school visits and social media.

The CHE's current method for measuring student numbers is based on the total registration of majors in each Department. This leads inevitably to an underestimate of the interest in studying Philosophy by students in general, disincentivises changes designed to satisfy this interest or to increase the opportunities for students from other Departments and Faculties to take Philosophy courses, and reinforces the effect of declining numbers of enrolments in the Humanities.

Recommendation (essential): Universities must measure the actual number of students attending classes offered by a Department, and not only the number of Department majors, and that the former number be taken into consideration when allocating budgets.

Recommendation (important): Universities should encourage and incentivise the creation of new joint programmes of study and courses directed at non-majors.

Recommendation (important): Departments should regularly consider whether they can improve their outreach, especially to schools and professional communities.

See the additional recommendations in the diversity section below.

3. Diversity

The Philosophy Departments we visited have been less successful than their parent institutions as a whole in reflecting the diversity of Israeli society. In faculty, women are substantially underrepresented, and Arab and Haredi communities are barely represented at all. In the student body, the situation is better regarding gender balance, but there is also consistent under-representation of the Arab and Haredi communities. The small number of Arab students is due, at least in part, to the preference among this demographic for pursuing vocational studies that will lead directly to careers such as medicine, dentistry, and engineering. Haredi students are barely represented due to a high degree of separation from the rest of Israeli society in general.

Recommendation (essential): Universities must adapt their budgeting model so that it is sufficiently flexible to support a continuing effort to hire from underrepresented groups, in particular, by allowing Departments to repeat a search without making a new application to the University or Faculty concerned in cases where the first attempt to make a hire is judged to be unsuccessful.

Recommendation (essential): Departments must be proactive in seeking to hire women faculty who are on a par with the best applicants.

Recommendation (essential): Departments must be proactive in seeking to hire Arab faculty who are on par with the best applicants.

Recommendation (essential): Departments must ensure that their syllabus and curriculum are sufficiently broad and inclusive to appeal to underrepresented groups, including women and Arab Israelis.

Recommendation (essential): Medieval Islamic Philosophy must be represented in the Israeli academy, given its importance to the Western Philosophical tradition, and its potential for capturing interest from students who might not otherwise think to enroll in Philosophy programmes.

4. Language Training

BA: As noted above, only a limited portion of the Western philosophical canon has been translated into Hebrew, whereas a much wider variety of texts – from a wide range of world philosophical tradition – are available in English. In addition, much of the field’s contemporary writing and secondary literature is available only in English. Mastery of English is thus an important prerequisite to advanced philosophical study (even for those who have mastered German, French, Chinese, or other major philosophical languages). The recent requirement of the CHE that students take at least two classes in English during their undergraduate studies goes some way toward improving English language training and skills. But, while the classes are taught in English, some allow class participation and assignments to be in Hebrew. This might be a necessary compromise given the weak level of speaking, writing, and reading in English of many students. But for those whose English proficiency is on the cusp of mastery, more rigorous English-language coursework should be expected.

MA/PhD: Israeli departments should be aware that many leading Philosophy departments in the English-speaking world that traditionally required two foreign languages (in addition to English) for the PhD have begun to allow students to fulfil one or both expectations with the option of studying skill-specific classes (e.g. Linguistics (for philosophers of language); Physics (for philosophers of science)) that would benefit the student’s specific orientation. While the second language should remain a requirement for students specialising in the History of Philosophy, Israeli departments may want to consider adjusting the policy in the other cases.

Recommendation (important): At the BA level: Departments should look for ways of incorporating more English writing and speaking that are not excessively demanding for weak students.

Recommendation (important): At the MA/PhD level: Departments should allow replacing the second language requirement with a skill-oriented course of similar scope.

5. Internationalisation

Philosophy in Israel is characterised by an impressive degree of internationalisation. A high percentage of the faculty at each institution we visited completed their PhDs at departments overseas. All of the Departments include scholars who possess impressive international profiles and are embedded within valuable international networks. The larger Departments - particularly HU and TAU (the latter not included in this assessment exercise) – regularly place their top students in leading PhD programmes overseas. All the Departments participate in student exchange programmes that allow them to send their students to leading institutions overseas. There are very few exchange students from overseas visiting Israeli Departments (primarily due to the language barrier). Some faculty members use their ISF budget to fund post-docs from overseas. In recent years Departments have also recruited a small number of non-Hebrew-speaking faculty from overseas.

One area where there is scope for greater internationalisation concerns visitors. There is already a steady flow of international visitors who participate in departmental colloquia, workshops, conferences, and other special events. These visitors bring significant benefits to the Departments in question. That said, the extent of financial support that is available to facilitate international visitors varies enormously from Department to Department. In light of this discrepancy, it would be helpful for Departments to pool resources to accommodate visitors and for these efforts to be supported by their institutions.

Another area where there is scope for more significant internationalisation concerns international students. At present, the fact that teaching is done almost exclusively in Hebrew is a substantial impediment to the recruitment of international students. It would, therefore, be advisable to consider the development of specific degrees or programmes taught exclusively in English that would potentially provide a vehicle for a dramatic expansion in the number of international students. This is already done at Tel Aviv, which offers a BA (liberal arts) taught in English.

Recommendation (important): Institutions and faculties should encourage coordination across departments by providing resources to facilitate joint visits by international scholars.

Recommendation (important): Universities should investigate the possibility of introducing new degrees or programs taught exclusively in English, removing an impediment to the recruitment of international students.

6. Infrastructure

The infrastructure of the Departments visited by the Committee varies greatly, from Ben Gurion at one end, which provides faculty with good individual offices and provides students with well-equipped and modern working areas, to, at the other end, Bar Ilan, where faculty do not have individual offices. The most general failing we noted was in common rooms for students, where the discussion and social bonding central to a high-quality university education could take place. These failings not only hamper the flourishing of faculty and students but are often taken as a sign of disrespect for the discipline by the institutions concerned. Regarding libraries, the situation is much better (and more uniform) between the three universities we visited, and we were impressed by the librarians we met, who struck us as highly committed and informed.

Recommendation (important): Affected institutions should take urgent measures to upgrade facilities in line with the specific recommendations in our individual reports.

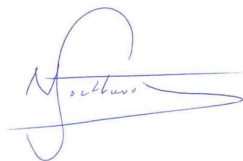
7. Follow-up and Implementation

The last evaluation of the field of Philosophy was conducted in 2009. Given the long span of time between reports, it is essential to devise a follow-up mechanism that engages with the

progress of the Departments and institutions in implementing the recommendations. This should not be left to the initiative of each University, but rather the follow-up mechanism should be established by the CHE. The Committee believes that a progress report every other year (consisting of no more than 2-3 pages) and a longer in-depth assessment of the implementation of recommendations after five years will be required of the universities and submitted to the CHE. In the subsequent evaluation of the field, each Department should include these progress reports as an appendix.

Recommendation (important): A follow-up mechanism should be established by the CHE involving a progress report every other year (consisting of no more than 2-3 pages), as well as a longer in-depth assessment of the implementation of recommendations after five years.

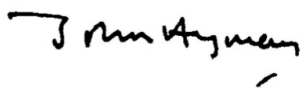
Signed by:

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Professor Nicholas Southwood

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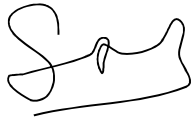
Professor Tamar Gendler

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Professor John Hyman

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Professor Eli Friedlander

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Professor Simon May

Appendix 1 – Letter of appointment