



# Pe'er Project: Opening the Treasures of the Mind

<http://per.openu.ac.il>

*The Pe'er Project allows Internet users free access to much of the Open University's wealth of academic material.*

In a bold and innovative initiative, the Open University has posted on the Internet many of its textbooks, accompanying material, lesson plans, presentations and other learning aids, making the material freely available to anyone in Israel and throughout the world who wishes to use it. This special project is "Pe'er" (a Hebrew word meaning "splendor" and also an acronym in Hebrew for "Opening the Treasures of the Mind").

To start, all the materials for ten courses in different fields have already been posted on-line and within two years, dozens more will follow, in the fields

of the Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences. This marks the first time an academic institution has made whole courses – including its text books – available on the Internet and allowed the wider public to use them free of charge.

The books are offered to the public in a sophisticated electronic format, accompanied by digital learning aids such as a full audio version in MP3 format, recorded video lectures and interactive exercises. The project will include one course in Russian that will cater to the Russian immigrants in Israel and Russian speakers around

the world. In the future, courses translated into Arabic will be offered electronically on-line for the benefit of the Arabic-speaking population of Israel and the Middle East. The Pe'er project successfully combines the ability of the Internet to make information instantly available with the OUI's dedication to educational outreach. As Prof. Gershon Ben-Shakhar, President of the OUI, put it, "Today, the OUI rises to another level. The project impressively advances the OUI's social and cultural mission: to disseminate knowledge and academic education among as many groups in the population as possible."

## University Milestone

The official opening of the Pe'er Internet Site was marked by a seminar on the topic "Open Knowledge for the Public Good," at which the initiative was welcomed by Lord Harry Woolf, Chancellor of the Open University of Israel, Prof. Ora Limor, Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Prof. Gershon Ben-Shakhar, President.

Special guests attending the event were Prof. Brenda Gourley, Vice-Chancellor of the Open University UK, who instituted an Open Learning website of the OUUK, and Prof. Shigeru Miyagawa, of the MIT Open Courseware team.

Dr. Yoav Yair, director of the Shoham Center, who headed the project, explained its genesis. "Two years ago, I was approached by the Yad-Hanadiv Foundation and asked to think 'out of the box' in devising ways to help Israeli students. We started by considering who today's students are. Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we found, have technological know-how from an early age, expect good service 24/7 and want to learn wherever they are, on their own time and at their own pace. The 'Open Books' policy fulfills that need."

Readers can choose a course and open the website, choose particular chapters, zoom in and out, enlarge or see two pages on one screen. However, they can't print the material or use it without giving credit – "the Open University's copyright is not to be violated," said Dr. Yair.

Pe'er is an expansion of a previous project titled "Northern Exposure" which involved helping students from the north of Israel whose studies were disrupted as a result of the war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006. The aim was to give them access to course

material of the Open University among other resources.

"The Pe'er Project means that knowledge is available to all, everywhere. Even a student who is doing IDF reserve service far away from home can still read on-line texts, provided he has Internet access. As for the future, it's hard to see where this is going, but it will be something great. We live in a brave new world, and the OUI is in the forefront," said Dr. Yair.

An enthusiastic supporter of open learning is Prof. Gourley, who was awarded an Honorary Fellowship at the OUI spring graduation ceremony and who spoke at the seminar on the topic "Open Educational Resources – A New Paradigm for Higher Education?"

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New trends are changing the higher education model that has been in use for thousands of years, which is, according to Prof. Gourley, "elitist and not participatory. Students are voting against this model with their feet. In my opinion, Open Education Resources change everything. It is a whole new paradigm and for Open Universities it is an imperative. Much more, it is our destiny."

The pioneer in the field of open educational resources is the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which started its Open Courseware system in 2000. Prof. Miyagawa, founding member of the Open Courseware team at MIT and Professor of Linguistics and Japanese, explained the reasoning behind MIT's decision to make 1,800 of its courses, to date, completely open to whoever wishes to

use them and praised the OUI for its initiative.

Prof. Miyagawa explained how initially, MIT had aimed to come up with a business plan using the Internet. "Our committee sat for six months and decided that MIT should not be linking educational materials to money, but the opposite – making its materials available for free. Today, the site offers a wide variety of materials, from lecture notes to videos of actual classes to examinations and student projects. You can even find drafts of textbooks that will soon be published.

"Why do we do it? For humanity, as intellectual philanthropy; for education, as a way to improve teaching; for MIT itself, to promote and brand the university."

Today, the MIT OCW web-site has two million visits per month and is translated into a number of languages. Those who access the sites come from all over the world. Almost half are self-learners, 17% are educators and 37% are students. As for the benefit to MIT, 17% of freshmen say one factor in their choosing to study at the university was the website, making it a tool for recruiting students.

Concerning the Pe'er Project of the Open University, Prof. Miyagawa had this to say: "You are taking leadership in this region of the world and bringing a unique model – Open Books. I am so excited about this. You can do it because you have a treasure trove of material, which others don't have. This is a courageous act but you are going about it in exactly the right way, with all the ingredients that enhance your chances for a big success – understanding and supportive staff, financial support and a talented team dedicated to it."