

## Outreach

*The Open University of Israel considers it a major objective to reach out to the community through various initiatives, projects and cultural events, in order to contribute to the society around it. These include concerts, conferences, and a dedication to improving the environment.*

### New Diagnostic Center for Adult Learning Disabilities Testing Opens at the Open University

*The Open University helps adults with learning disabilities earn a degree and achieve their full potential.*

What did Galileo, Albert Einstein and Mozart have in common? Surprisingly, they shared not only genius, but some form of learning disability. They rose above their difficulties, but for many others, learning disabilities in adulthood have been a bar to full achievement of their potential.

"Childhood learning disabilities have been recognized and diagnosed for some time, but it's only recently that academic institutions have begun dealing with the learning difficulties of adults," said Dr. Tali Heiman, a member of the senior faculty in the Department of Education and Psychology at the OUI, who heads the recently-opened Adult Learning Disabilities Diagnostic Center.

"If adults have a learning disability, they can be profoundly affected throughout their lives. They may be intelligent, but they might not be able to attend university. We have found, though, that with standardized diagnostic tools and the right accommodations for their disabilities, many adults with learning disabilities are able to earn academic degrees. In fact, I know one such student who even completed a Ph.D."

Learning disabilities have been defined as a varied group of disorders among people of average-high intelligence, which may be emotional, academic, behavioral or social, and which result in significant difficulties in the acquisition or use of learning skills. Academic difficulties include problems with reading, writing, spelling, mathematics, memory, organization, motor and spatial coordination; emotional difficulties include low self-esteem and need of support; social difficulties include difficulty in interpreting what they see and hear and deficiencies in

*"We have found that with standardized diagnostic tools and the right accommodations for their disabilities, many adults with learning disabilities are able to earn academic degrees. In fact, I know one such student who even completed a Ph.D."*



social skills; and behavioral problems include difficulties in handling change and pressure.

Learning disabilities are presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction and may appear across the life span. Approximately 5-25% of the general population is estimated to have learning disabilities, according to Dr. Heiman, but in spite of this, many are now seeking higher education. In the US, college enrolment of students with learning disabilities increased from 1.2% in 1984 to 8.8% in 2005, while 3.8% of UK college students have learning disabilities. In Israel, 3% of students with learning disabilities are now in higher education. At the Open University alone, the number of students with learning disabilities has risen from about 800 in 2001 to 2045 in 2007 (though the total number of students has also risen.)

"For students with learning disabilities, the university can be a nightmare. When



***Opened in January, the Adult Learning Disabilities Diagnostic Center has already proved popular with students and is expected to assist some 800 students a year.***

these students enter university, they are not only beginning an unexplored and unfamiliar way of life, but embarking on a journey that threatens them," said Dr. Heiman. Nevertheless, she notes that at the Open University, most such students are well-adjusted academically and socially and graduate approximately a year later than their non-disabled peers. Her research has shown that some 84% study Social Sciences at the Open University, 11.5% Sciences and 4% Humanities, a distribution similar to other students. The marks they earn in their courses are much the same as those of other students as well.

The new Center at the Open University was designed to help such students. It offers all Israeli students seeking higher

education (including those seeking to study at universities other than the Open University) a standardized, computer-based test battery – MATAL – for the diagnosis of learning disabilities. The fact that the tests are standardized is of major importance because there can be an enormous variability among diagnosticians in their background and their approach. The battery of tests is based on current research in learning disability, as well as on research in cognitive psychology, neuropsychology and psychometrics.

Although the tests are computerized, each person is also seen by a professional from the Center before the test and after the test in a second meeting, to discuss the results.

Based on the results, a recommendation is made about the accommodations that are needed to best enable the student to succeed. These might be, for example, recommending that the student be allowed extra time in examinations, allowed to bring notes or mathematical formulae if the student suffers from memory problems, allowed to type instead of write by hand, and in exceptional cases, offered the possibility of oral rather than written examinations.

Opened recently, the Adult Learning Disabilities Diagnostic Center has already proved popular with students and is expected to assist some 800 students a year.

In order to provide even further assistance to students, the Open University also offers the use of a Learning Disability Resource and Research Center. Here, small groups and workshops help students acquire academic skills such as how to study and how to read texts in English, so that they can more easily adapt to the academic demands of higher education. The Center plans to foster research on various aspects of learning disabilities.

Now being planned is a Center for Assistive Technologies, which will make use of innovative technological developments to enable students to overcome learning difficulties.

The Open University, through its open-admission policy and distance learning methods, has long aimed to ensure that every student who wants to study at university is afforded the opportunity. Now, students with learning disabilities have also been given that chance.