

# Foreword



This report summarizes the activities of the Open University of Israel for the 2006-2007 academic year. At the outset I would like to stress our key achievements as well as the difficulties we faced in the past year, and our major plans for the coming academic year.

This year as well we experienced conflicts with the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) regarding the approval of new programs and budgeting. These conflicts began when we submitted two new Master's degree programs in psychology for approval: Social Psychology and Cognitive Neuropsychology. Initially, the PBC rejected the programs outright, claiming that practicum options at the OUI are very limited and that the University is not "suited" for teaching subjects that have a clinical/professional aspect such as these. After withdrawing its opposition following our appeal, the requests were transferred, as is customary, to the CHE university subcommittee for deliberation. The subcommittee decided that first there should be a discussion, in the CHE plenum, concerning the character and aims of the OUI.

At about the same time, Prof. Yehuda Friedlander submitted the conclusions of the committee he headed, appointed by the CHE in its previous term, to examine the OUI teaching system and our relations with external bodies. In July, the CHE held a discussion about the OUI, its character and goals, attended by the OUI President and the Vice President for Academic Affairs. The discussion opened with a lecture by Prof. Sarah Guri-

Rosenblit on open universities and distance education, and ended with a presentation of the Friedlander Committee report by a member of the Committee, Prof. Shimon Yankelevich. The Friedlander Committee report praises the OUI on its achievements and refutes the claim of a flaw in offering intensive tutorials and in the validity of our agreements with external bodies. The report leaves the door open for a discussion about the direction of OUI development in light of the planned increase in advanced degrees. The discussion in the CHE is not yet concluded as we have not had time to respond to several questions, however it was agreed that the CHE would hold a discussion on the programs we submitted and consider them in the same way that they consider programs submitted by any other academic institution.

We assume that the dispute will continue, primarily with respect to the approval of advanced degrees. In my opinion, this is the main arena with which we will have to contend in light of the fact that the development of advanced degrees – including research degrees and in the future also PhD studies – is critical to the OUI's future development. Unfortunately, no progress has been made with the PBC concerning budgeting issues, despite repeated PBC promises to adopt a unique budgeting model for the OUI.

This year as well, the CHE conducted a process of quality self-evaluation. Two fields were examined at the OUI: management and history. The reports of the examining committees were good and praised both fields at the

OUI. The positive and favorable report about the OUI stands out against the backdrop of harsh criticism leveled at the majority of management programs at other institutions. The main criticism leveled at the OUI pertained to the need to improve the status of the course coordinators and tutors and mentioned that such a measure requires increased PBC budgeting.

Following the CHE reports on the self-evaluation, and in light of the understanding that the future of the OUI depends on developing advanced degrees and enhancing the research dimension, we decided to act to expand the senior faculty. This decision has already been implemented and in the upcoming academic year, six new members will join the senior academic faculty: two in the Computer Sciences, two in History, one in History of Art and one in Psychology. In the course of the coming academic year, we plan to issue about 12 new tenders with the aim of reaching 70 senior faculty members by October 2008.

This year we began the implementation of the recommendations of the internal committee for examining the status of course coordinators, and approximately 100 veteran course coordinators entered the new ranking system. We are currently implementing the recommendation to freeze the position scope of course coordinators for a period of two years in order to prevent fluctuations in scope every semester. We also currently offer course coordinators involved in research the option to receive a six month exemption from teaching and course development in order to devote their time to research, and three academic teaching staff members have already taken advantage of this option. In addition, the appointment committee established to address the ranking scheme began to identify candidates for rank 4, one from each academic department. This is the highest rank in the academic teaching staff advancement track. The rank will be granted to individuals with a PhD who are involved in research on a continuous basis and whose primary place of work is the OUI.

The OUI Strategic Forum continued its discussion about the organizational structure of academic departments and the academic administration, however, a decision has not yet been reached. The Strategic Forum adopted the recommendation of an ad-hoc committee to establish a program of studies in Social Work at the OUI. The program is currently being developed and will be submitted to the relevant academic committees for approval and concurrently, we are examining of budget sources necessary for its implementation.

The OUI studies project for the ultra-orthodox sector continued this year, and the first group of 120 Yeshiva students achieved impressive course success rates and average grades. We hope to expand this project in the coming year. The project for assisting Arabic-speaking populations, including, among others, the translation of textbooks in introductory courses, began this year. We hope this will improve the perseverance of Arabic-speaking students at the OUI and will attract more students to the University.

This year we opened the new and attractive Rennert Study Center in Ramat Aviv. In its first academic year, enrollments reached about 17,000. In line with our expectations, the center serves as an excellent alternative for other study centers in the Tel Aviv area that operated mainly in schools.

This year we launched a new project called *Pe'er* (the Hebrew acronym for "opening the riches of the spirit"). This bold project aspires to post OUI courses on the Internet, including complete textbooks, accompanying material and advanced technological tools. All the materials will be freely open to the public. We plan to upload ten courses by the coming spring and four additional courses within two years. This 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.

From a budgetary perspective, we ended the year with a balanced budget, without needing to use budget reserves. This achievement is credited to increased efficiency in all areas as well as to unexpected growth in enrollments (mainly in the summer semester), enabling us, among other things, to reward the employees and to advance OUI development.

Our main tasks in the coming academic year include increasing research at the OUI, continuing the expansion of the senior faculty, advancing the academic teaching staff, addressing the issue of tutors, continuing efforts to increase student persistence in studies, developing advanced degree programs and continuing activities that address special population groups.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to wish the entire Open University family a productive and enjoyable academic year.

  
Gershon Ben-Shakhar  
President, Open University