



65 Courses, 17,000 Weekly Hours and Growing

The Shoham Center for Information Technology in Distance Education's Ofek Project, which already transmits 17,000 real-time weekly online viewing hours through Ofek to thousands of the university's students, is continuing to expand in a number of interesting and exciting ways – including extending a helping hand in times of crisis to colleagues.

When Israel's south was under missile attack, Sapir College in Sderot contacted the Open University of Israel. "What can you do to help us, if we have to close our campus in the future?" The answer was swift and immediate: "You're welcome to use our Ofek facilities."

It was only natural that Sapir College would contact the Open University as Ofek's capabilities and facilities for online learning outstrip the sum total of all of Israel's universities.

When Sapir was forced to close during the war in Gaza, rather than missing classes, thousands of students residing within a 40 kilometer radius of the Gaza Strip were able to continue learning uninterrupted, from their homes and even bomb shelters. So, too, for Open University's students in the south, who are part of the tens of thousands of students actively using Ofek's facilities.

Through its five recording studios,

the Open University uses several instructional methods.

1. Live classes (synchronous teaching) which are simultaneously broadcast on the Internet. Students, wherever they may be sitting, can log on and at any point during the course of the class can phone the lecturer directly or use the interactive I Chat feature to ask questions or have the lecturer clarify points.

2. Video conferencing. This is a "live" interactive feature whereby participants can directly dialogue with other distant participants as well as with the lecturer. For example, a student in England can present his final seminar paper for approval to his instructor in Israel.

3. Web conferencing. These tools allow lecturers to conduct interactive lessons from their home computers to the students' PC's while using bi-directional video, voice or simply written text.

4. Videoing lectures/classes in advance (asynchronous teaching). With this method, there is no interactive feature. Sapir College selected this method.

5. Broadcasts of pre-exam reviews and special classes. The use of this broadcast medium is growing dramatically. In the past two years, where the initial number of 'viewing hours' might have registered 1,000 hours, today it tops 5,000 hours.

More than 80 courses are now available online. And, with the newly created video library, eventually all of the courses offered at Open University will be accessible.

"This is an enormous task, but we're well equipped to handle it," Boaz Mermelstein, head of the Ofek team assures. "And, of course, we'll still be available to help our colleagues when they need state-of-the-art facilities to keep their students au courant during times of crisis."