

Foreword

The first Open University students began their studies in October 1976. In the thirty years since then, distance learning has undergone significant change. This report summarizes the activities of the Open University in the 2005/2006 academic year, marking thirty years of distance learning, and addresses the developments of the University during this period.

In this foreword, I will delineate our major activities in the past academic year, the difficulties we encountered, and our plans for the future.

The war in the north unfortunately cast a cloud over the end of the academic year. Two OU students studying this year were killed in the war: sergeant-major Ro'i Yaish, 27, of Herzliya and sergeant-major (res.) Naor Kalo, 25, of Kibbutz Maagan Michael. Two others killed in the war were lieutenant Amihai Merhavia, 24, of Eli, who was enrolled to begin his studies in the Fall 2006 semester, and staff-sergeant (res.) Ben (Binyamin) Sela, 24, of Koranit who was a student in Ascolot. We send our condolences to the bereaved families and, along with all the people of Israel, hope for peace and calm.

The war disrupted studies at the Open University, particularly for students in study centers in northern Israel and students drafted into military service. During the war, we made an effort to find solutions to the disrupted examination timetable as well as for tutorials planned for the summer semester in study centers in the north. The solutions included, among others, alternative exam dates, postponed tutorials and reducing the amount of material included in summer semester examinations. At the same time, we did not respond to student demands to grant a "pass" grade without an exam. We maintain that such an action is neither acceptable nor appropriate.

The beginning of the year was marked by conflicts with the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC – *Vatat*) that decided to freeze deliberations on all OU programs of study until a CHE committee, mandated to examine our teaching organization and the ties between the Open University and various external entities, submitted its recommendations. The PBC also rejected two undergraduate programs (in Communication and in Film Studies), submitted as part of the University's five-year plan, on the grounds that "similar programs are offered by colleges in the periphery". We maintained that these decisions reflected a basic misconception about the role of the Open University in higher education in Israel, stemming from the view that the OU no longer has a role in the age of multiple colleges. Accordingly, we appealed these decisions. At a series of meetings with all PBC members and most CHE members, we explained the unique role of the OU in the higher education system, and, as a result, our appeals were accepted.



This year we continued our efforts to increase access to the OU for our unique target populations (students in the periphery, Arabic-speaking students and the ultra-orthodox). A breakthrough occurred this year in the ultra-orthodox sector: a group of about 120 yeshiva students enrolled in OU courses and participated in separate tutorial sessions on the Jerusalem campus. This project was made possible, among others, by earmarked donations that we received to help these students finance their tuition and by providing reinforcement in academic Mathematics and English.

This year we also stepped up our activities in the Arabic-speaking sector and opened new study centers in Sakhnin, Masadeh, Tamra, El-Mustaqbal College in Afula, Mgar, and in the College of the Negev (the Bedouin Center). We also received a grant that will enable us to translate several courses into Arabic in accordance with the recommendations of the Dotan Committee (January 2005) that examined our activities in the Arabic-speaking sector.

New study centers were opened in the periphery this year (in Ofakim and in Mitzpe Ramon), and we absorbed a group of Ethiopian-born students at our study center in Jerusalem who receive academic and financial assistance.

In the academic area, the CHE approved a program of study for a Master's degree in Culture Studies and a program of study towards a Bachelor's degree in Software Engineering. These two programs require further development and therefore will not be offered before Fall 2008. Unfortunately, for reasons related to planning, the PBC did not approve a program towards a Bachelor's degree in the Natural Sciences with an emphasis on Bioinformatics.

The OU Academic Committee approved new programs in the University's current five-year plan to be submitted to the CHE: a track in Managing Education Systems for the graduate program in Education, and dual-disciplinary Bachelor's degree programs in Film Studies, Communication and Philosophy.

The committee for examining the status of course coordinators submitted its recommendations this year. The recommendations were approved by the Faculty Council and were submitted to the Academic Committee for approval, and we are preparing to implement them during the coming academic year. One of the recommendations is to design an advancement track for course coordinators. Advancement will be based on criteria of academic excellence, performance and contribution to the OU. This track will increase the motivation of the academic teaching staff and will enable outstanding course coordinators to move up the rank and pay ladder. The University will also act to increase the participation of academic teaching staff on OU academic committees.

Discussions in the Strategic Forum focused on development policy regarding programs and courses, integrating technologies into course development and teaching, the organizational structure of the academic departments, policy regarding senior faculty, and more.

This year we continued our efforts to strengthen research at the OU. The Research Authority held a "Research Day" that included lectures and a poster exhibition representing research activity at the University. One of the most important indications of research activities is the degree of success in obtaining grants from competitive research funds. From this perspective, there was a significant increase this year – OU researchers were awarded seven grants.

For the first time this year, we held a "Student Day," as do all other universities. The event was held at the OU campus in Raanana and was successful and enjoyable, with 3,500 students participating.

Following the move and adjustment to the new campus in Raanana, we invested efforts this year to convert our previous campus in Ramat Aviv into a study center to serve students in Tel Aviv and central Israel. The new center will enable us to offer morning classes in the Tel Aviv area and we hope it will be an improvement and a significant addition to the existing study centers located in schools. The construction project in Ramat Aviv was made possible in part thanks to a generous donation from the Rennert family of New York. Activities in the new center will commence in Fall 2006.

In conclusion, I would like to wish the entire Open University family a happy and productive academic year. I hope that this will be a year of development and accomplishments, a year of redemption of prisoners of war and an end to killing and violence.

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