

Spotlight: Academic Counseling and Study Guidance

The Open University offers unique academic counseling and study guidance services that differ from those offered by other higher education institutions. The need for such services stems from the variety of population groups at the OUI compared to other universities. Many students require counseling and study guidance services expressly because the OUI does not have admission requirements: some students register although they lack adequate preparation for academic studies, before having considered what they want to study and prior to closing knowledge and learning skill gaps; others have not studied for years; some get lost in the bureaucratic maze; and others encounter difficulty contending with assignments. Even veteran students often find it difficult to understand the profusion of academic study programs offered and to select their specific path. Consequently, they take advantage of the academic counseling services in choosing a study program towards a degree. The counseling takes into consideration the student's progress, achievements and aspirations.

Hence academic counseling is part of the service package that the OUI offers both prospective students and those already studying at the University. Its goal is to help students succeed in their studies in pursuit of a degree even when their preparation is lacking and despite the various obstacles and difficulties they may encounter in the process. In addition to counseling, the Academic Counseling and Study Guidance Center within the office of the Dean of Academic Studies accompanies students in academic aspects unrelated to specific courses, offering tools for enhancing learning and study skills. Advisors from the academic departments function alongside the Center's advisors to design suitable individual study programs.

Counseling is not mandatory; however, the number of students seeking counseling is continuously rising. In the last two years, about 80,000 prospective and veteran students received general academic counseling. Tens of general advisors offer counseling services at 47 study centers throughout the country, primarily (85%) through individual meetings with students. The majority (94%) of those who received academic counseling were undergraduate students. Of the 50,986 prospective students who received counseling between 2005 and 2007, 64% enrolled in studies.

Academic Counseling

Academic counseling is provided by Open University faculty and departmental advisors (field-specific counseling), and by general advisors (general counseling) at the Open University campus in Raanana and at the Open University's study centers throughout the country.

At other universities, students register for a full academic year in a specific department, while at the OUI students enroll in individual courses each semester; studies are conducted throughout the country; and students study alone for the most part, with the help of a variety of learning and technological aids. Most OUI students have only superficial contact with their fellow students with whom they can share their difficulties and concerns. The general and field-specific advisors, accessible to students in study centers throughout the country, can fill the resulting need for assistance and encouragement. They also help students who studied at other academic institutions to design a suitable study program that will take into account their prior studies.

The majority of **general advisors** are OUI course tutors and some are course coordinators. While they are not necessarily familiar with the specific contents of every course, they are knowledgeable about the structure of the various study programs offered by all academic departments and the workings of the system and are acquainted with the relevant internal bodies that handle various problems. When students require more in-depth knowledge about specific knowledge fields, they are referred by the general advisors to the relevant academic department. As the OUI organization is dynamic and decentralized, the general advisors are updated through a dedicated Counseling Unit Intranet site on which relevant information from authorized sources is continuously posted. General counseling is offered throughout most of the year,

with high demand during semester registration periods. Advisors are recruited after being recommended by the academic teaching staff and undergo training pertaining to the counseling rationale and about providing counseling services. They also observe counseling provided by veteran advisors and as novice advisors receive feedback from veteran colleagues who accompany them.

Field-specific advisors are usually course coordinators and frequently also senior faculty members. Student counseling is one of their job responsibilities and they are expected to focus on providing specific counseling on the selection of courses in the study programs offered by their department. The advisors are very familiar with the course(s) they teach as well as other courses in the field; they have general knowledge about study programs, study tracks and the prerequisites of courses offered by their department. In several departments, the departmental advisors undergo training similar to general advisors.

Types of Counseling: Explanations for prospective students are provided at **orientation sessions** conducted every semester during the registration period throughout the country. General advisors, who have a panoramic perspective of studies at the OUI, present the OUI and answer questions concerning the duration of studies towards a degree, study methods at the OUI, degree accreditation, differences between the OUI and other universities, etc. Questions of an individual nature; for example, the suitable study track for a specific student, are not addressed at these sessions.

Individual counseling is provided to all prospective, new and veteran students. In most cases, counseling is provided shortly after the orientation sessions, and is also offered on a regular basis at study centers, mainly in the afternoon and evening hours. The advisors help students choose an initial study direction, explain the flexibility of personal study tracks at the OUI and the option to change direction during the course of studies. Veteran students considering the most suitable study track for them can receive individual counseling that also takes into consideration their personal data that is stored in the OUI database. General counseling focuses on the student's scope of studies, study track and English studies. Students are shown how to find information in the Information catalog and on the OUI website, and in many cases are referred to relevant University entities. For example, advisors may advise prospective students to examine textbooks found in the OUI library, contact the Committee for Accreditation of Prior Studies, receive additional counseling from field-specific advisors or join a learning skills workshop. Individual counseling sessions are documented in a computerized system, enabling students and advisors to review what was said and done at prior meetings. Counseling is not mandatory; however, the OUI advises students who have accumulated 42 credits to receive counseling prior to submitting an individual study program for approval. In designing the program, academic advisors use the computerized system to identify possible difficulties and assist in designing an alternative study program.

Field-specific counseling in academic departments is provided to prospective and veteran students seeking help in designing a study program most suitable to their abilities and needs. The advisors assist students who studied towards a Bachelor's degree in other institutions and are interested in pursuing a Master's degree at the OUI, students who at a certain stage in their studies prefer to change their study track and need to find a study program that will take into consideration the courses they have already taken, students studying in dual-disciplinary programs in two different academic departments, random inquiries, etc. These advisors are sometimes involved in organizational decisions pertaining to teaching issues in their department; for example, when students enroll in a new course but, due to few enrollments, it is not opened and it is therefore necessary to offer alternatives to those already registered. Most departmental counseling is provided on the telephone or by e-mail, a channel that has gained significant popularity in recent semesters. The number of inquiries is high and advisors contend with a large counseling load. Accordingly, they focus mainly on handling inquiries and questions pertaining to course selection for the upcoming semester. In small departments with a limited course offering, the departmental academic advisors also help in planning and designing study programs.

Guidance for Developing Learning Skills

The OUI's open admissions policy combined with the high level of academic studies necessitates methods and tools to help students with the academic potential to deal with the academic requirements and to complete their studies towards a degree. Studies at the OUI require students to have self-study abilities and to deal with a relatively large amount of material within a short period of time. This requires various abilities: critical reading, data processing, comprehension, text analysis as well as high level academic writing. For this reason the OUI offers learning skill training to new students in group workshops and individually. Training focuses on imparting and developing tools for effective reading of study material, processing and summarizing academic texts, question analysis and effective exam preparation. For veteran students, the University offers workshops on academic writing alongside bibliographic training offered by the library, with the aim of preparing students for writing seminar papers in advanced courses. Such workshops are rarely offered by other institutions of higher education.

General learning skills workshops aim to impart to students in various Humanities and Social Sciences courses skills such as reading and summarizing study material, comprehending and answering questions, and preparing for exams.

Field-specific workshops focus on learning skills required in difficult introductory courses such as Introduction to Psychology, Introduction to Macroeconomics and General Biology I. Each workshop is adapted to the contents of the specific course.

Individual study skill training is offered to all new students. Individual sessions focus on the student's unique learning needs. Students who feel that they are not fully realizing their abilities and those in need of assistance in dealing with feedback they received from a tutor about an assignment they submitted may take advantage of the individual study skill training option. Tutors in several courses participate in learning skill training workshops and in the future all tutors will take these workshops as part of their on the job training.

Student Perseverance

The OUI examined the success of learning skills training as reflected in student perseverance rates, measured by course enrollment. The survey, repeated over 3 semesters, tracked the perseverance of both new and veteran students who participated in a learning skill workshop or workshops in Spring 2005, as compared to all students enrolled in courses in the same semester. "Dropouts" are defined as students who did not enroll in any OUI course for three consecutive semesters. The survey showed that the perseverance rate of students who participated in learning skills workshops was consistently higher than that of students who did not take these workshops.

Services for Students with Learning Disabilities

The OUI operates one of the largest centers in Israel for helping students with learning disabilities, and in recent years has assisted about 1,800 students each semester. The Planning and Budgeting Committee funds a substantial share of OUI activities in this field. The service is offered only to students with a diagnosed learning disability. Students reach the Center in several ways: through the registration form on which they indicate their learning disability, through academic advisors at study centers or through their course tutors. Students who suffer from exam anxiety also receive assistance in reducing exam anxiety.

Learning disabilities professionals accompany students with learning disabilities throughout the course of their studies at the OUI. In an initial acquaintance session, the advisor receives information about the student's learning history, learning style, specific past difficulties, prior diagnoses, treatment received and its effectiveness, etc. In certain cases, students receive academic counseling at this initial session, guiding their selection of a study track and initial courses,

as well as determining their recommended pace of learning. When there is difficulty understanding the nature of the student's disability and its relationship to academic tasks, the student is invited to sessions to clarify the relationship between the disability and difficulties in scholastic tasks, and given emotional support. During the student's first semesters at the OUI, special exam conditions are provided for the student, based on the didactic diagnosis and the advisor's recommendations.

If the initial session reveals difficulties related to learning skills, the student is referred to individual learning skills training. Such training focuses on organizing time, strategies for question analysis, organizing answers and summarizing theoretical material. Training is also provided in preparing for and taking exams. Learning skills training in small groups is offered in addition to regular tutorial sessions in about 20 courses. This training is specifically designed to address the academic requirements and study material of the course. Through the EFL Unit, assistance is also provided these students in English reading comprehension courses. The training options are intended to help students with learning disabilities develop and enhance their study habits and the learning skills they need as independent learners in an academic system.

During their studies at the OUI students with learning disabilities continue to seek counseling, in difficult moments or when in need of specific assistance. In order to find appropriate solutions, the advisors often involve additional University entities, among them the Dean of Academic Studies, course coordinators, and the academic and administrative departments.

Technology-supported counseling and training were developed this year and, through the Center for Assisting Technology, the OUI is acting to expand the use of advanced technologies with the aim of helping students with learning disabilities. This involves mapping student needs and identifying and applying suitable technologies. Training is offered to students in using unique technologies that will enable them to compensate for the difficulties they face in the learning process. Students interested in enhancing learning processes by using computers and technology are referred to a counseling meeting to find the suitable technology, view a demonstration, train and practice using software and technological aids in their studies. Learning assistance software includes reading software in English and Hebrew, word processing software for writing mathematical formulas, translation and editing software, etc. Some of the software and aids are loaned to students for use at home.