

# Foreword



As I end my term as President of the Open University, it is with great satisfaction that I am able to sum up its activities during the passing year, before I take my leave. I have reported elsewhere on the achievements of the University during my term of office, and here, as each year, the President's Report will summarize the activities of the OUI in the past year. I will begin by highlighting the OUI's major achievements as well as the difficulties it faces.

In the previous report, I stressed the disagreements and misunderstandings we encountered with the Council of Higher Education (CHE) concerning the OUI's role in the higher education system today, and with the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC – Vatat) regarding OUI budgeting. I believe that most of the disagreements were resolved in the past year and I am hopeful that the University's future relationship with both these bodies will be based on productive cooperation.

The change followed a positive report of the committee appointed by the CHE (the Friedlander Committee) to examine the OUI's teaching system and arrangements with other institutions. It was also the result of continued public relations efforts on the part of the OUI and appearances before the CHE plenum. I am happy to report that the PBC recently decided in principle to approve a budgeting model for the OUI that we formulated together with the PBC's professional team. The model will be implemented in the next budget year, and this will result in an increase in funds that the PBC allocates to the OUI.

The past year was characterized by rapid expansion of the senior faculty. Twelve tenders were conducted for new faculty members in all academic departments. The tenders resulted in the recruitment of 11 new faculty members for the coming academic year in various disciplines: mathematics, computer science, life sciences, psychology, public policy, economics, industrial engineering and management, cultural studies, Judaic studies and Hebrew literature.

The CHE approved three new undergraduate programs for a dual-disciplinary track: History of the Middle East and its Cultures, Communication, and Philosophy. The OUI Academic Committee approved three new programs this year that will shortly be submitted to the CHE: a BA in Social Work, a BA in Philosophy, Economics and Political Science; and an MA in History. The Academic Committee also approved a PhD program at the Open University, which will contribute to positioning the Open University as a research institution. If approved by the CHE, this program will enable associate and full professors at the OUI to serve as independent doctoral thesis supervisors in the framework of the OUI. To carry out this program, regulations were formulated for the doctoral program, which include the establishment of a Research Student Authority and a mechanism for appointing doctoral supervisory committees and reviewers. The regulations were approved by the Academic Committee.

Extensive efforts were invested this year in the project aimed at increasing student perseverance. Seven mission teams composed of senior faculty members, academic teaching staff and administrative personnel addressed key factors affecting perseverance (expansion of field-specific academic counseling, specific counseling for new students, study skills development workshops, workshops for guidance on writing seminar papers, etc.). Two pilot studies were conducted: one, on bringing back dropouts, examined the effectiveness of directly approaching students who discontinued their studies despite having succeeded in their first courses, and the second examined the feasibility of veteran students mentoring new students (the *Hetchel* project).

This year, elections were conducted for the Student Council and, for the first time since its establishment, like all other universities, the OUI now has a Student Union.

With respect to course development, the University continued its focus on updating and rewriting old courses or replacing them with new courses. This policy has resulted in an increased number of updated courses. Nonetheless, many old courses have yet to be updated.

The *Pe'er* project – Opening the Treasures of the Mind – was launched this year. As planned, textbooks for ten courses were posted on the Internet together with study materials and technological learning aids and many additional courses are in the process of digitalization.

This year, we offered an intensive program for enhancing management. Two groups participated in the program; one included academic department chairs and heads of administrations and the second was composed of heads of large administrative units and representatives of the academic teaching staff. The program exposed the need to create an ongoing dialog between OUI management and University managers and employees, to strengthen the relationship between academic and administrative employees and to continually clarify OUI goals. At the end of the program, teams were appointed to implement the recommendations in future programs.

Expanded OUI activities and the resulting growth in academic and administrative staff created a space shortage on the Raanana campus and it became apparent that we needed to expand the campus. A decision was reached recently to construct a new building with about 100 offices and a 500-seat auditorium, and a steering committee for the project was appointed. In the coming months, we hope to finish raising the funds needed to finance the new building and to complete the plans required to obtain construction approvals.

As in previous years, this year will also end with a balanced budget despite the growth in academic and administrative personnel as well as salary increases. This balanced budget is due in part to a continued increase in enrollments.

I would like to end on a personal note. I am about to end my term as President of the Open University and to take leave of this wonderful institution. My five years as President were both challenging and fascinating and gave me great personal satisfaction. During this time, I learned to appreciate the Open University's unique contribution to the higher education system and to Israeli society in general and I am glad to have had the opportunity to play a part, if only for a relatively short period, in this important enterprise. The OUI's impressive achievements are accomplished mainly thanks to the dedication and commitment of all OUI employees, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them all for their cooperation and the help they gave me during my term. I am convinced that the OUI will continue to develop, flourish and realize its goals under the leadership of Prof. Hagit Messer-Yaron and I wish her every success.

Gershon Ben-Shakhar  
President, The Open University