

Spotlight on Internal Evaluation in the Service of Teaching and Learning

The Open University has, from its inception, invested extensive efforts in developing a high-quality teaching and learning system that can serve its diverse student body while ensuring high academic standards. To achieve this complex goal, the university has taken various steps, among them the establishment of an internal evaluation system with the following objectives:

- To examine the teaching system and its various components on an ongoing basis
- To provide systematic information within a reasonable timeframe to OUI students and staff
- To use the data for designing and improving teaching processes and their outcomes
- To provide a broad and reliable information base for decision making on all levels
- To identify trends and needs of various groups

Most evaluation processes are initiated by OUI management, the Office of the Dean of Academic Studies, senior faculty members, chairs of departments, heads of academic fields, the academic teaching staff, the Dean of Students, and sometimes administrative units, and they receive the results for review. The Evaluation Department and the Computer Center continuously improve and enhance the evaluation tools.

Evaluation is currently conducted through four main channels:

- Generating ongoing feedback on teaching
- Performing surveys and research on teaching and learning issues
- Performing quality self-evaluation for the Council for Higher Education
- Developing technological tools for teaching teams

Generating ongoing feedback on teaching

Ongoing feedback is generated, at the end of each semester or academic year, through the following: The teaching survey that provides student feedback each semester; data gathered on student achievements, characteristics and preferences; and data on teaching and learning, which are gathered and processed on a regular basis.

The teaching survey: The survey is conducted electronically every semester. It includes specific questions (for example, "To what extent did the tutorial sessions contribute to clarification of the study material?" or "To what extent did the tutor create interest in the course?") as well as items that provide an overall indication of student satisfaction with the course in general, the tutor and tutorials, assignments and course website activities. Unusually high or low findings are highlighted to enable decision-making. Cumulative data is also presented, enabling users to view trends over time, reach conclusions and handle areas of difficulty. The survey is also one of the tools used by course coordinators to evaluate tutors.

Student achievements and characteristics – the "Grade Site" for teaching teams: The "Grade Site" is available to the teaching staff online and serves as the major tool for retrieving information regarding students' grades immediately after the data is entered into the system. The site includes grade distributions, averages and standard deviations of exams and assignments, correlations between assignment and exam grades, and more. All measures are presented on the level of the course, tutor, group, and study center, and enable comparisons by semester. The information on the site helps the teaching staff to analyze data for their specific needs regarding the quality of tests, tutors and the teaching process.

Ongoing information on teaching and learning, and statistical data: Data on graduates, outstanding students (President's List and Dean's List), recipients of financial and *Perach* scholarships, unusually high or low exam averages, etc., are provided on a yearly or semester basis and used for both reporting purposes and decisions on teaching issues. For example, evaluation reports served as the basis for formulating policy regarding above or below average course grades and for reexamining President's List and Dean's List criteria.

Performing surveys and research on teaching and learning issues

The University conducts numerous surveys and research studies on learning and teaching issues in response to queries initiated by OUI management, academic departments, the Evaluation Department, as well as individual

initiatives from researchers and academic teaching staff. The resulting recommendations are implemented on various levels: the course, the field, the department, and university-wide. Evaluation studies can be divided into five categories as follows:

Course and study program evaluation: The main objective of this category is to make decisions relating to improvement or rewriting of existing courses, improving tutorial processes, changing assignment structure, adding material to a course website, etc. This type of evaluation includes didactic aspects (level of difficulty, text clarity, interest level, course assignments, etc.) and content aspects (recommendation to rewrite or update, scope of the change required, etc.). The content aspects are evaluated by senior academic faculty members and external consultants in the relevant field. This is essentially an academic process. Didactic aspects are generally evaluated through internal evaluation surveys, usually after a new course is taught for the second time. Courses are often evaluated at the request of the course coordinator.

Evaluation of teaching and learning methods: In evaluating didactic processes and measures in one or several courses (for example, seminar papers, expanded papers, the scope and nature of assignments, exam structure and contents, the integration of learning skills guidance), the focus is on observing didactic processes for the purpose of improvement or to formulate policy. Some of these are one-time evaluations while others are conducted on a regular basis:

- Evaluation of reinforcement tutorials for students with learning disabilities and the contribution of these tutorials to student success (every semester)
- Comparing assignment and final exam grades in courses in which the number of assignments was reduced or the use of notes during the exam was authorized
- Evaluating a pilot project intended as an aid to submitting seminar papers on time, and following that, planning an examination of seminar paper writing workshops on a wide scale

Developing learning and teaching technologies: The evaluation focuses on a variety of issues relating to development and implementation of teaching technologies with the aim of making decisions pertaining to feasibility; the effectiveness and user-friendliness of technological tools and their contribution to teaching; training required, etc. Other issues evaluated include the use of course websites, the use of dedicated courseware in specific courses, the use of WIKI for collaborative learning, the use of distance learning tools (videoconference, *Ofek*, etc.), and attitudes of the teaching staff. In many cases, tools and applications were developed in response to needs identified through evaluation studies. The development and implementation are also assessed, for example:

- A filmed module was developed for the course, "Introduction to Macroeconomics," in response to a specific difficulty identified in the course. Implementation of the module was accompanied by a controlled experiment.
- A digital audio version of the course "Human Resource Management" was produced for special needs students
- The perspective of course coordinators and tutors was examined with respect to technology integration in academic teaching
- A survey was conducted among tutors to examine their attitudes toward the online assignment system

Special populations studying at the OUI, including new students, special needs students, Arabic-speaking students and ultra-orthodox students. Surveys are conducted to identify learning characteristics and unique needs of these populations with the aim of adapting teaching to their specific needs. Issues examined included:

- Study and perseverance patterns among ultra-orthodox students
- Attitudes of new immigrant students toward studies at the OUI
- The integration of students of Ethiopian origin in the OUI
- Students with hearing or visual disabilities: difficulties, coping and ways to help

University-wide issues that require monitoring over several years, have ramifications for activities and processes, and pertain to a large number of individuals at the OUI. One prominent example of such an issue is student perseverance. Cumulative data from over a decade of surveys made it possible to identify key junctures at which

students leave the system: during their first courses, when they are unable to meet assignment requirements, when they do not meet English requirements, before submitting seminar papers, etc. These findings served as the basis for action that the University is currently taking (this topic is discussed in the section on teaching).

Performing quality self-evaluation for the Council for Higher Education (CHE)

Several years ago, the CHE initiated a quality self-evaluation process at all higher education institutions. Each year, the Council announces the disciplines for evaluation for the specific year. To date, self-evaluation was conducted at the OUI in Computer Science, History, Economics, Business Administration, Psychology and Life Sciences, and reports were submitted as required. The fact that the OUI conducts regular and systematic internal evaluation helped the departments deal with CHE requirements. Nonetheless, the process provided an opportunity to readdress issues and processes from the perspectives of academic teaching, development and research.

Developing technological tools for teaching teams

As part of the University's efforts to become a computerized university, a number of tools were developed in recent years to help the academic teaching staff deal with the large amount of information available to them for managing and improving instruction. Among the tools developed: the Grade Site (described above) and the *Matmon* system that aids in development and checking assignments and exams (described in the section on Integrating Technologies).

Internal Evaluation Processes at the Open University

The Evaluation Department is involved in most issues that relate to the evaluation of teaching and learning. The process begins with the request and a description of the need, followed by formulation of evaluation questions and a decision about the research procedure and instruments. The instruments are then developed (surveys, focus groups, telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews, etc.) and information is collected from various sources (students, academic teaching staff, tutors, senior faculty, management, academic advisors, data from OUI computerized databases, etc.). The findings, based on the information gathered and processed, are presented to the entity that requested the evaluation in a summary report that includes conclusions and recommendations. In many cases, implementation of the recommendations is accompanied by another evaluation process to study the effectiveness level of the changes or improvements implemented.

Surveys are the most commonly used research method in OUI evaluation studies, though personal interviews and focus groups are also conducted. Existing databases that provide information on students' background, study characteristics and achievements are used extensively.

Pilot studies using experimental and control groups are controlled and supervised. Their aim is to gather data to enable decisions on alternative courses of action. Some internal evaluation studies were conducted in collaboration with OUI senior faculty members and the results were published in scientific journals.

Summary

Effective internal evaluation in an organization requires an organizational climate with a high degree of openness and trust that strives for improvement based on learning from experience and accepting decisions based on data. After many years of conducting evaluation studies to enhance teaching and learning, such an organizational climate has developed. Internal evaluation activities are conducted with maximal collaboration between those conducting the evaluation and their various clients, and findings and recommendations are implemented on a regular basis. Evaluation processes are currently integrated into most of the major changes implemented in the teaching system. This comprehensive, intensive and systematic internal evaluation endeavor seems to be unique to the Open University.