

# Foreword



A year ago, on the eve of Rosh Hashana, I took office as President of the Open University of Israel (OUI). Since then I have acquainted myself with virtually every member of the University staff. Meetings were arranged in Raanana with all academic and administrative departments; I visited study centers countrywide where I had the opportunity of meeting with tutors, and personal sessions were scheduled with anyone who wished to talk to me. I discovered that the OUI has been successful in recruiting and retaining a group of dedicated, keen and competent individuals, who love their work and appreciate their workplace. In no time I found myself adopting the term "The OUI family" and soon felt I had become part of it.

The 2008-2009 academic year was a formative period for the OUI as an organization. In response to needs expressed by employees, this year, the OUI moved a long way in the transition from personal to collective employment contracts. Senior faculty members had already formed their own union years ago, and a similar process began, across the board, in February 2008, with tutors and course coordinators joining "Power to the Workers", and the administrative staff joining the "New Histadrut Federation of Labor". The management is now engaged in parallel dialogues with each group. A new approach is now required to meet the needs of both the administration and the employees in line with current trends.

Throughout its history the OUI has been a fair and good employer to its staff, both collectively and individually. Labor laws were strictly kept, and whenever possible, measures were taken to benefit the employees, as evidenced by the special and positive atmosphere which has always prevailed within the OUI. Similarly today, in the face of change, the management recognizes the wishes of employees to be involved in setting the terms of their employment. Defining new checks and balances that ensure both responsible management and employee involvement requires considerable adjustment over a period of time.

The crisis point in this adjustment process occurred with the strike of the teaching staff in April and May 2009. This was the first serious hurdle in 35 years of smooth operation. In coping with the strike and its consequences, the OUI demonstrated resilience which will hopefully facilitate rapid adjustment to the new reality.

Alongside these upheavals, the OUI continued with its routine changes. Several members of management, who had worked with my predecessor and continued working with me, have ended their terms of office:

- Prof. Ora Limor has left for a sabbatical, and Prof. Judith Gal-Ezer, who had formerly served as Vice President for Academic Affairs, agreed to take on the position once again. We will benefit from Prof. Gal-Ezer's experience and insight.
- Prof. Sonia Roccas has taken over from Prof. Tamar Hermann as Dean of Academic Studies.
- At the end of the academic year, the Director General David Klibansky, completed his term after nearly five years in office. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for his dedication. Without him the transition would have been much harder. Mr. Amit Streit, who has held many senior positions, the last as Chief Financial Officer at Tel Aviv University, has taken over from Mr. Klibansky.

I would like to thank wholeheartedly Prof. Limor, Prof. Hermann and Mr. Klibansky, and wish every success to their successors – Prof. Gal-Ezer, Prof. Roccas, and Mr. Streit.

Changes are known to arouse apprehension, especially dramatic and substantial as those encountered this year. In this respect, it is appropriate to quote Charles Darwin, the originator of the theory of evolution, who stated: "It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change". I

believe that the Open University and its staff members will respond positively to the changes and emerge even stronger as a result.

In spite of this turbulent year we have not forgotten the mission of the OUI. As an institution of higher education, the *raison d'être* of the OUI is to respond to national needs and provide every student, whoever he or she may be, quality education with utmost accessibility and complete flexibility.

The task of the OUI is threefold: academic development, research and teaching. The academic development system establishes the quality of studies at the OUI, and since the use of OUI textbooks extends to other higher education institutions in Israel, it also determines, to an appreciable extent, the standards of higher education in general in the entire country. This past year we decided to prioritize the issue of development, a traditional focus of academic activity at the OUI, and appointed Prof. Yoav Yair as the first **Dean of Academic Development and Technologies**. Prof. Yair will be responsible for optimizing development processes at the OUI and adapt them to standards of higher education in the third millennium.

A high level of academic development cannot be achieved without active involvement in research. In the past, a significant amount of course development at the OUI relied on external scholars, i.e. faculty members of other research universities. Today we have nearly 80 senior faculty members who are responsible for the vast majority of academic development, while concurrently involved in research. This year we continued to expand senior faculty, and engaged a dozen new faculty members whom any university would be proud to have. These are scholars who chose the OUI, not only because of its unique character, but also because of the research opportunities the university offers. In order to emphasize the importance of research, we have promoted the role of the Head of the Research Authority to **Dean of Research**. Prof. Anat Barnea has taken over from Prof. Miriam Souroujon. Towards the end of her term in office, Prof. Souroujon focused on establishing research clusters. The object of this unique endeavor was to further strengthen research at the OUI, by identifying and characterizing ancillary areas (e.g. education technologies), in which we have an impressive number of researchers, despite a relatively small senior faculty. I would like to thank Prof. Souroujon for her contribution, and wish Prof. Yair and Prof. Barnea every success in their new positions.

The third and perhaps most visible element for which the OUI is known, is its teaching methods. Through teaching we maintain contact with our major "consumers". Tuition is our main source of income, and teaching is our largest expenditure. Due to negotiations with the tutors and course coordinators, improvements in teaching – even those planned in the past – have been temporarily halted. Nevertheless, the OUI will continue to pursue its teaching mission and goals by aspiring to provide quality higher education to everyone, everywhere, at all times. In our commitment to "education for everyone" lies our greatest challenge. Because we have such a vast range of students – from the most gifted and independent to those lacking in basic study skills – we must constantly be creative, innovative and flexible. We make every effort to offer our students a "toolbox" and help them "pick" those tools that will best suit their individual needs and abilities. The student has been and always will be our top priority. This was evident when students affected by the tutors' strike were offered supplementary tutoring sessions, as well as unprecedented accommodations without any compromise on academic standards. We even provided refunds, a unique policy unheard of in any other academic institution in Israel.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the OUI – a non-profit institution – is the only university in Israel which has been able to maintain budgetary balance and good governance for years. This reflects our flexibility and our capacity to adjust to changing conditions. Thus, in times of want we spend sparingly, while in times of plenty we invest more in the students and the employees. To continue with this responsible management we need the good will and cooperation of all OUI employees. For these achievements I thank you all, the OUI Council, the Executive Committee, the management, the Academic Committee, each and every employee, our wonderful students as well as all those supporting us through the Friends of the Open University Associations, in Israel and abroad.

Hagit Messer-Yaron  
President of the Open University of Israel

