

Spotlight on the OUI's Student Union

The Open University is based on distance learning. From the student's perspective, this means that the OUI is not a campus university. Thus there is very limited contact among students, and student-based social life, the hallmark of other Israeli universities, is virtually non-existent.

Since its establishment three decades ago, OUI students have never been represented in any organized form. First attempts to form a Student Union began in 2005, when a group of students united with a view to establishing an independent union. In 2007 internet elections for the "Open University Student Council" were held for the first time, under the auspices of the university. Despite the novel technology (these were the first ever internet elections for a Student Union in Israel), the number of voters did not meet the minimum requirement and the elections were declared invalid.

The election process was re-launched after the "Students' Rights Law" was legislated by the Knesset in May of the same year with a view, as stated in the law, "to set out the principles regarding the right of the Israeli citizen and the Israeli resident to have access to higher education and the principles regarding the rights of the student, in recognition of Israeli society's commitment to these rights and to equal opportunity in higher education." The law grants students the right to unite and determines that "An institution will facilitate elections for a student union at the institution, at an appointed date in coordination with the institution's administration."

The new legislation prompted the OUI to hold another round of elections for the "Student Council of the Open University" in May 2008. Representatives were elected and the Council finally came into being. In May 2009, the Registrar of Non-Profit Societies (*Amutot*) officially recognized the OUI Student Union. A representative of the Student Council was invited to the OUI Council meeting and presented its members, its current activities and future plans.

As a new union, the OUI Student Union tried to shift the focus of its agenda from protests against rise in tuition fees and promotion of student recreation to serious involvement in social change. The Union's activities are motivated by the powerful potential of 45,000 students from all regions of the country – current and future leaders in diverse areas (e.g., economics, education, the military) – to bring about real social change and improvement in every aspect of Israeli society. The budget of the Council was devised with this goal in mind, and various activities have already been carried out within the framework of social endeavors, and implemented in cooperation with other social organizations.

The Structure of the Student Council

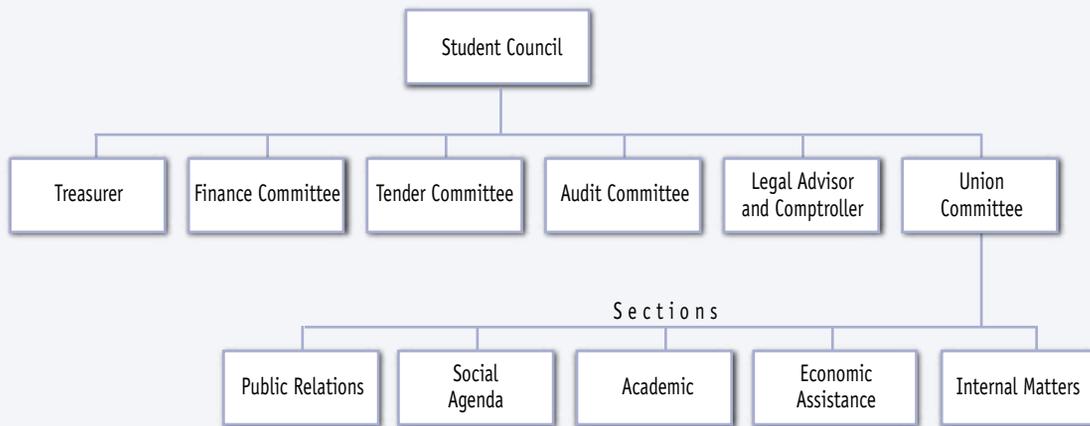
The Student Council is the elected body of the Student Union, and as such its decisions are binding. The Council is composed of 39 members, regionally elected (each elected student represents one study center or two small adjacent ones). The council elects a president and two vice-presidents from among its members. The role of the presidency is to manage and supervise the council's activities by means of convening and following-up all sessions of the Council and its Committees.

The Council also elects seven of its members to the Student Union's committee. Each member, the chairman excluded, is responsible for a different task: the vice chairman assists with logistical matters while the others are responsible for various departments (external relations and social involvement, economic assistance and grants, academic matters, culture and student welfare, public relations and the media). The Council runs the Union's day to day activities, while the Committee implements the Council's decisions.

All remaining Council members serve as coordinators of all student study-center related problems, addressing every request. Council members also serve on the Council's Finance Committee and on the Student Union's Tender Committee, and are respectively responsible for the control of budgetary issues and the employment of workers by the Union.

The Council employs a Treasurer (a senior accounting student) who deals with financial management of the Union, a legal advisor who assists with legal matters, and a Comptroller (both external professionals, as there are no law programs at the OUI). The role of the Council's Audit Committee, which is composed of students who are not Council members, is to control the activities of the various Student Union departments and to address claims and complaints against the Union.

Organizational Structure of the Student Council



Support from the Dean of Students

The Dean of Students was of great assistance both during the elections process as well as during the formation of the Student Union. Moreover, the Dean of Students facilitated the Union's initial organizational steps and smoothed its work with the different bodies of the OUI. The Dean of Students also assisted the Student Union with its initial budget in the form of a loan from the OUI, so as to minimize any delay in its activities. He helped consolidate the financial basis of the Student Union by introducing "social services fees", and processing the fees within the OUI computerized system; facilitated the construction of a temporary internet site for the Student Union and then the allotment of an additional budget to establish an independent internet site for the Student Union (utterly independent of the OUI site); guided the planning of next year's activities with regard to issues involving the OUI (such as future elections); and prepared an agreement between the Student Union and the OUI, defining the working relationship between the two.

First Year Activities

Work procedures of the Student Council and the Student Union with the different bodies of the University, were established during the first year, alongside the following activities:

- Email notifications were sent to students, informing them of the activities and campaigns offered by the Student Union to the student community, including academic marathons, various study workshops and grants.
- Direct distribution of two issues of *StudentOp*, the Student Union paper, together with study materials. The purpose of the newspaper is to ensure a wide presentation of student-related matters, and all writers and editors are therefore OUI students. Topics covered include: activities of the Student Union; special banking and credit concessions; students views on how to achieve an academic degree; social and cultural issues.
- Cooperation with commercial companies has been established in order to harness the consumer power of OUI students to attaining competitive prices at some chain stores.
- Tutoring activities were initiated for the more difficult courses. Apart from OUI routine tutorials, special pre-exams classes offered general review exercises. In addition, given the minimal level of demand for study groups in some courses, regional groups were opened.

- Representatives were sent on behalf of the Council to meetings of University bodies, including the University Council and the Disciplinary Committee. Student Union representatives will participate in meetings that concern them.
- Working relations were formed with different University bodies, including the President of the University, the Dean of Students and the Dean of Academic Studies. Procedures for addressing requests and handling of problems have also been formulated.
- Contacts with other Student Unions were made with a view to learning methods of coping with various challenges confronting students.
- Setting up a temporary internet site for the Student Council, linked to the OUI internet site, followed, in summer 2009, by the launch of an independent site for the Student Union. The site is comprehensive and diverse, serving as a platform where students can exchange summaries and academic material. Acquisition of various services is also possible via the site.

Activities during the Teaching Staff Strike

The strike of tutors and course coordinators, which began after the Passover holiday, was the Student Union's first test. For the first time the newly established Student Union had to act with a view to preventing – or at least minimizing – the strike's effects on students. As soon as the strike began, the Student Council convened an emergency session where tutors presented their complaints against the University. The Council members listened to their claims, and decided that, despite the Council's understanding and sympathy for the teaching staff's struggle to improve their employment conditions, the Council would not support either side in this dispute. Moreover, the Council decided to closely follow the ongoing negotiations between the parties in order to ensure that they were advancing towards ending the strike, and to protest if there is no breakthrough. The Council also decided to recommend that students refrain from submitting assignments before tutorials resumed, so that their final course grade would not be affected. A meeting was also set up between Council representatives and the University management where the latter's viewpoint on the strike was heard.

Following two weeks of negotiation, no significant advance was apparent and the Student Union began to organize protests calling on both parties to quickly reach an agreement. In view of the slow progress, the Student Union decided to protest outside the Ministry of Education. However, before holding the protest, contact was made between the Minister of Education and the Chairman of the Union, and the Minister agreed to intervene. With the intervention of the Minister, a mediator was appointed with a view to bring the labor dispute to its end.

Together with these efforts to end the strike and resume studies, the Student Union was involved in bringing the spring semester to a successful close, academically. A forum was established for this purpose on the Student Union website where a heated debate (more than 10,000 messages) was held on the nature of the concessions needed, and on the problems faced by students during the strike and afterwards. In the end, a package of concessions to assist the students was agreed upon. These were as beneficial as concessions achieved by other well-established Student Unions, in other universities, and had no adverse effect on the high academic level of the OUI.

Future Objectives

The Student Union is still in its early stages. In the near future, the Union intends to initiate new projects and a variety of activities, as well as to improve its accessibility. The Union will promote socioeconomic related projects in cooperation with other organizations to secure budget allotted grants to students participating in community service for the needy. With regard to cultural activities, the Union will organize trips and extra-curricular activities designed to enrich student cultural life beyond regular studies at the University.

New Student Card and Social Service Fee: Beginning in the academic year 2009-2010, an annual social service fee of 95 NIS is paid by every student interested in receiving additional services from the Student Union, regardless of membership in the Union. This sum is considerably lower than fees in other universities, since the OUI Student Union, unlike other Student Unions, has no inherent structural expenses and does not provide services generated by campus life. Only fee paying students are entitled to additional services, such as personal injury insurance and job-search workshops. Payment of the social service fee will be marked on the Student Cards issued annually by the OUI.