

# The "Academic Commando"

## A Unique Program of Study for Combat Soldiers



The official commencement ceremony of the "Academic Commando" took place in May in the residence of the President of Israel. Shown with the soldiers are (from left to right): IDF Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi; Minister of Defense, Mr. Ehud Barak; OUI President, Prof. Hagit Messer-Yaron; President of Israel, Mr. Shimon Peres; Minister of Education, Mr. Gideon Sa'ar.

The vision of the President of Israel, Shimon Peres, was to give young Israelis an opportunity to obtain an academic education while still doing their compulsory military service. Aimed at contributing to the country's prosperity, his vision resulted in the creation of a unique academic study program. Known as the "Academic Commando," the project was designed especially for combat soldiers approaching the end of their compulsory service.

The goal of the program is to enable demobilized soldiers to begin civilian life already armed with proven academic achievements, and to continue to study without interruption toward an academic degree in various areas of engineering and computer science.

The Open University is the only academic institution in the country with the ability to undertake such a program because of its unique characteristics: open admissions as well as flexibility in geographical location and in designing study programs, together with its high academic level.

An intensive five-month study track was designed to enable soldiers to take a cluster of courses, the equivalent of the first year of university studies toward their bachelor's degrees.

Several options for continued studies are available to graduates of the program:

- They can continue studying toward an Open University degree on a track relevant to the courses taken in the program.
- They can transfer to another university, where they can continue their studies toward a degree.
- They can take additional courses at the Open University and then switch to a different field, continuing their studies at another university.

The pilot program was launched in April 2010 as a joint venture of the President's Residence, the Open University, the IDF and the Ministry of Defense. The first participants were 43 male and 5 female combat soldiers, who studied as boarders at an army facility. The OUI's Academic Counseling and Study Guidance System supported the students throughout the program and studies were further facilitated by tutors recruited by the IDF specifically for the program. The project is financed jointly by the Open University, the Ministry of Defense and the Libi Fund (Fund for Strengthening Israel's Defense).

The majority of the participants completed the program successfully. Some successfully fulfilled the requirements for transfer channels, and others passed several courses, which will be recognized when they continue their studies at other universities. Several participants are already continuing their studies toward a degree this year. The soldiers expressed their satisfaction with their studies and the support they received, and felt that the program provided them with important experience in academic studies.