

Foreword

This report presents a summary of activities at the Open University of Israel (OUI) for 2010-11, the 35th year of the University's operation as an institution of higher education, and the third year of my term as President. In it, we review the University's activities in all academic areas and cover a range of non-academic activities. As a university, the OUI functioned in academic areas related to: (a) teaching – degrees, courses, students, graduates, and study centers; (b) research – establishing research institutes and providing stronger support for researchers; and (c) academic development – new academic programs, developing and revising courses and their production using advanced technologies. The report also addresses the OUI's activity as an entity, reliant on employees, buildings, budgets, friends and supporters, as well as tradition, atmosphere and that special quality that has come to be known as the "OUI spirit."



Although the OUI's activities, and especially its academic activities, have shown consistent improvement over the past several years – with more academic programs, more courses, and growing numbers of students and graduates, on the institutional front we recently experienced major discord. Just before I took up my present position, course coordinators and tutors unionized and demanded collective negotiations to improve their work conditions; they were closely followed by members of the administrative staff. Thus, of necessity, the first two years of my term as President focused on attending to labor relations. By definition, this is no simple task and it was accompanied by upheavals, but the matter ultimately reached a successful conclusion resulting in the signing of collective agreements that guaranteed, *inter alia*, peaceful labor relations in the coming years. Hence, I am glad to say that during my third year as President – the year covered by this report – we were able to concentrate on building and looking to the future on the basis of stronger foundations.

All branches of the OUI joined forces over the past year in preparing a multi-year, forward bound strategic plan. This plan, to be executed beginning in the 2011-12 academic year, utilized the input – in terms of both time and administration – of dozens of OUI employees and was formulated with the full cooperation of the academic and administrative departments. The plan is composed of two major sections: (1) new directions and (2) retaining and improving existing procedures. Although it is the new that naturally attracts attention, improving on past achievements is a guaranteed path to success. For many years, the OUI has enjoyed a tradition of excellence that rests on outstanding employees who are dedicated to the organization and continually strive for improvement. For this reason, the multi-year plan emphasizes evolution rather than revolution. However, there are processes that require systemic focus and direction; these are the new directions that stem from identifying trends on one hand, and defining goals on the other; they also outline ways to achieve goals in a changing environment.

The multi-year strategic plan includes a number of new directions. The first and foremost among these relates to the Open University's mission of accessibility. The OUI was established as a unique institution designed to enable capable individuals to acquire a high quality academic education, whether by taking individual courses or by studying toward a university degree. The OUI provides a unique solution for those who are unable, unsuited or unwilling to adapt to the rigid, structured frameworks of other institutions of higher education (i.e., the admission requirements for undergraduate studies, followed by full time study over a fixed period of 3-4 years that demands regular attendance at campus-based lectures). Another goal of the OUI since its establishment was to give people living in the geographic periphery an opportunity to realize their academic potential. However, since the 1990s, tens of colleges have been established throughout the country and today there is a higher education institution close to almost every settlement in Israel. Therefore, we face a new challenge: today's focus is on increasing accessibility to higher education among the *social* periphery, primarily the ultra-Orthodox population and Israel's Arabic speaking population. Policy makers on all levels agree that the social integration of these populations is unsatisfactory, partly because they are inadequately represented in the higher education system.

There is a constantly growing need, imposed by the work market, to acquire an academic education as a prerequisite for employment, coupled with an increasing demand for continuing education courses. Hence, the need for education that can be combined with work (and is a form of lifelong learning) is a major nationwide challenge in the field of higher education.

The OUI is uniquely equipped to cope with these challenges by offering higher education both to those special populations and to people already in the work force, without concerns about quotas or other constraints. Hence, one of the main goals of the plan is “reaching new populations.”

Another key goal also derives from the OUI’s unique teaching method: of the 46,000 students enrolled in academic courses in any given year, alongside those who are studying toward a full academic degree, there are others who wish to take only an individual course (or courses) or experience academic studies unconnected to a degree. The basic study unit at the Open University is the semester-long course, rather than a degree program (consisting of 18-25 courses) as in other institutions of higher education. Each course is an independent unit – both academically and administratively – and as a result, a student is defined with respect to a course (in terms of enrollment). A student studying toward a degree is responsible for completing the degree requirements, which requires considerable initiative and self-discipline. Where studies are integrated into everyday life, it is only natural that constraints such as pressure in the work place, the arrival of a new child in the family and so forth, are liable to marginalize studies. Indeed, a recent survey we conducted showed that thousands of OUI students have completed over two thirds of their requirements toward a degree, and some two thousand of these needed only one or two seminars to complete their degree, but had not taken any courses for at least a year and a half. We plan to focus on this population. Our sense of obligation to Israeli society and to our students prompted us to act to encourage these students to return to their studies and complete their degrees. To that end, in the 2011-12 academic year, we plan to set up a designated center that will be the hub of all necessary activity – both academic and administrative – vis-à-vis this population.

In addition to these goals, we continue to develop and implement learning technologies in order to expand and diversify our tool kit, so that our students can customize their studies. As part of these efforts to extend and enhance student services, we introduced our own Smartphone application in the past year. We also plan to reach out to potential students and next year, for the first time, we will open a center that offers services to those individuals considering Open University studies.

As we have a firm commitment to transparency, the multi-year plan has been presented to all OUI employees and will be made openly available online.

Never known to rest on its laurels, in addition to all ongoing academic and administrative activity in higher education teaching, academic development and research, the Open University was involved in four unique events during the year covered by this report:

1. Completion of the collective agreements and beginning their implementation. The signing of these agreements with the junior faculty and the administrative staff heralded a new era in labor relations at the OUI, in terms of both administrative conduct and employment. At the same time, their implementation necessitates a different kind of deployment and all parties were called on to make a special effort during the past year. This was accomplished in a commendable spirit of understanding.
2. Practical engineering for the ultra-Orthodox: The OUI School of Technology reached out to the ultra-Orthodox community during the past year. The first preparatory courses in Practical Engineering specifically designed for that population were opened and 100 students have already taken them in study centers in ultra-Orthodox population centers, with full financial coverage from the National Institute for Technology and Science Training (*Mahat*) and other sources.
3. In the past year we reached the 30,000 mark of bachelor’s and master’s degree graduates of the Open University. The landmark occasion was celebrated with graduates, employees, friends of the OUI and guests (see the spotlight on our graduates in this report).
4. Two new master’s degree programs were approved this year by the Council for Higher Education. They will be offered in the 2012-13 academic year, thus increasing to eight the number of master’s degree programs available.

As you see, this has been a year of challenges on many levels, and as we review it, we also look forward in the hope that next year will see us building on past successes. We are grateful to all our employees, to members of the OUI authorities – the Council, the Executive Committee, and the Senate; to students, to graduates and to thousands of friends and supporters in Israel and around the world for sharing in challenges past, present and future.


Hagit Messer-Yaron
President, the Open University of Israel