

Foreword: Concluding My Term as President

The President's Report reflects an annual summary of activities at the Open University. Since this is the last time that I will be signing my name to it in my capacity as President, it is also the ideal time for an overall review. I would therefore like to take the opportunity to devote this foreword to a summary of OUI activities during my five years of service as president.

While acquainting myself with the OUI before taking up my new post in 2008, I discovered an institution that had managed to attract tens of thousands of students and sustain steady growth over many years, while maintaining an uncompromising level of academics. At the same time, the University observed meticulous management practices and budget control. Immediately upon becoming president, I was called upon to contend with a serious and unprecedented labor dispute involving teaching staff. We ultimately resolved the conflict, and the University withstood the episode. The challenge I faced then, and which has remained throughout my term, has been to resolve crises and deal with a variety of issues, while opening up new routes – and all with a view towards preserving and improving the vital elements for success already in place. This has translated into *evolution* instead of *revolution*; into achieving goals through gradual processes without upsetting the status quo. As I look back on my five-year term, I am happy to say that I was up to the task, with the help and support of many good people at my side.

During the past five years, the OUI has encountered challenges, yet has emerged in an even stronger position, with more students and graduates, additional courses and study programs, new learning technologies, greater national and international recognition, and increasing academic and research excellence.

The most prominent trends visible from the data in Table 1 and other numerical indicators, are as follows:

- **Growth in research:** As illustrated in Table 1, the scope of funding recruited by OUI researchers from external research foundations has grown by nearly 2.2 and currently totals over NIS 4 million. In addition, over the past five years, the OUI has established three successful research institutes, with a significant increase in internal Research Authority funding. The Dean of Research, appointed for the first time during my term as president, is responsible for promoting and directing OUI research.



- **Attracting new populations:** Over the past five years there has been a marked growth in the number of students from two specific groups targeted by both the Israeli government and the OUI. The number of Arab students increased by 76% and the ultra-Orthodox presence at the OUI increased by 99%. There was also significant growth in the number of high school and overseas students participating in OUI courses.
- **Increase in the Arts and Humanities:** While Israeli research universities in general are witnessing a decline in the Humanities, the OUI is showing a trend in the opposite direction. In the 2012-2013 academic year, courses in History, Philosophy and Judaic Studies were attended by 4,274 students, representing a 36% increase over the five previous years. During the same period, five senior OUI faculty members – all from the Humanities – were awarded prestigious Alon Scholarships; six others participated in the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities' Young Scholars Forum in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The Center for the Study of Relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims was established in 2011. The OUI is a partner in the interuniversity African Studies program, which was selected by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and is now a member of I-CORE, (the inter-university Israeli Centers of Research Excellence), which focuses on the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

Table 1: The Open University in Numbers from 2008-09 to 2012-13

		2008-2009	2012-2013	Change in %
Students	Total undergraduate students	42,356	42,560	0.5
	Total graduate students	3,274	3,755	14.7
	New undergraduate students	13,216	13,701	4.5
	New graduate students	1,096	1,204	9.9
	Students from the Arab sector	2,947	5,204	76.6
	Students from the ultra-Orthodox sector ¹	242	482	99.2
	Overseas students	724	849	17.3
	High school students	600	827	37.8
Graduates	Bachelor's degrees	2,386	3,231	35.4
	Master's degrees	333	603	81.1
Courses and Study Programs	Active academic courses	647	680	5.1
	Graduate studies programs	6	8	33.0
	New undergraduate programs approved by Council for Higher Education ²			Total for 5-year period: 8
Research	Grant applications for external funding	57	71	24.6
	Grants awarded from external funds	15	22	46.7
	Total external research budget from external funds	1,939	4,250	119.2
		(thousands of NIS)	(thousands of NIS)	

1. In special programs only. As in the past, additional ultra-Orthodox students are individually integrated into OUI studies.
2. Cognitive Sciences, Physics, Education (Learning Disabilities), Cinema, African Studies, Political Science, Literature and Art

- **Growth in overall activity:** the OUI budget rose considerably, while still remaining balanced, from NIS 400 million, in 2007-2008, to NIS 550 million in 2012-2013. This 37.5% increase reflects a parallel growth in overall activity, especially in terms of academics.

The rest of this report will focus less on statistics and more on a review of the varied activities of the OUI. The day-to-day operations of an institution such as the OUI are extensive and wide-ranging. In the annual President's Report we generally select projects and programs for review according to departments and disciplines. In this, my last summary, I have chosen to take a broader approach to reviewing the activities we have engaged in over my five-year term, which include both *projects* and *processes*.

Projects at the OUI generally exist in the short term. There are basically two types: **reactive projects**, created as a result of external circumstances; and **proactive projects**. During my presidential term, several very important projects fell

into the first category. The first and principal one was to settle the labor dispute, which we worked on intensively for nearly two years. At the end of a prolonged and difficult period of conflict, we were able to enter into a new era of organization, collective agreements, open dialogue, and partnership between employees and management. It was a turbulent beginning, but with union representatives participating in the deliberations, we ultimately reached an amiable *modus vivendi* in our working relationships, without compromising the functioning of the University.

Another reactive project brought to the fore immediately after my term began was the Russia Project, which lost funding during the economic crisis of 2008. Faced with a legacy of students all over the former Soviet Union, a designated body of teachers, thousands of books covering 24 academic courses in Russian, and no visible source of funding, we needed to take action. In an effort to avert the threatened closure of the project, we examined a new model of teaching tuition-based online courses at reduced costs.

Numerous people contributed to this effort, and they all deserve recognition: A team of Russian-language teachers; employees of the Shoham Center for Technology in Distance Education; the Computer Administration; the Resource Department; the Planning and Finance Administration, and others. Ultimately, although we met the logistical goals, we were less successful in recruiting students. Perhaps that makes it seem like a failed project – but that is not entirely true. The seeds of experience that were sown are now bearing fruit in other projects, especially MOOCs – Massive Open Online Courses, as will be further described below.

An additional project which became a resounding success is the Academia in High School program, which opens up the possibility of higher education to outstanding high school students. The project originated in the Ministry of Education and the Prime Minister's Office, but it was the Open University that took action, making it possible for the project to take shape. After only one year, the program is up and running smoothly. We also responded to the vision of President Shimon Peres, with the initiation of the Academic Commando pilot project. Designed to allow combat soldiers to study at the Open University in a track encouraging bridges to other universities, the goal was to ultimately shorten the duration of their academic studies. The project was successfully launched, but unfortunately had to be discontinued, due to a decision by the Ministry of Defense. With the benefit of three years of hindsight, it is now being re-examined.

Some projects fall somewhere between reactive and proactive. These include projects that had been in the planning stages but were accelerated because of external factors. One such example was the establishment of a system to reach out to potential students. Improving the application process was a defined objective approved by management several years ago. However, the 2009-2011 drop in enrollment figures (new enrollments in particular), made the implementation of the program a matter of greater urgency, and accordingly, it was completed in 2011-2012. As early as 2012-2013, impressive results were recorded, far exceeding our expectations: An annual increase of 20% in new students and 4% in overall student numbers were noted (see table 2).

Another project that may be defined as falling somewhere between reactive and proactive is the MOOCs program, which complements the existing *Pe'er* Project, offering free access to textbooks and study materials. Beginning in the 2013-2014 academic year, the MOOCs project will offer tuition-free OUI courses worldwide to anyone interested in higher education. These Internet-based courses will be available in four languages (Hebrew, Russian, Arabic and English). The project combines a globalized sustainability program with a desire to make study materials widely available. The OUI is offering these courses as part of an initiative by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU).

Naturally, it is the proactive projects that are the jewel in the OUI crown. The decision process for such projects is both painstaking and lengthy, and includes drawing up a five-year plan, which requires the cooperation of many employees from all OUI departments. The development of OUI proactive projects began with a series of broad-based talks, which resulted in the July 2010 distribution to employees of a document titled *Guidelines and Directions for OUI Development, 2008-09 to 2013-14*. Guidelines for a five-year plan to cover 2011-2015 were formulated in 2010-2011, with the input of 20 teams discussing various objectives, and with the cooperation of all employees. The plan was eventually published in its final format in September 2011, and was quickly launched. It included the implementation of a number of projects, some of which are described in greater detail below. Project 100, for instance, helped double the number of new Arab students studying at the OUI in 2012-2013. A Student Retention Project involved contacting thousands of students who had almost completed their OUI degrees, but were diverted from their original goals by the realities of everyday life. We encouraged these students to complete their degrees, while helping them fulfill all academic requirements.

Projects, by their very nature, either reach completion or are assimilated into the organization. Great effort was invested during the past five years in establishing long-term processes aimed at reinforcing the standing of the OUI. Space restrictions allow me to describe only a few of many such processes.

Table 2: Numbers of new students registered for OUI studies

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Fall Semester	7,164	7,605	6,974	6,742	6,432	7,541
Spring Semester	5,054	4,877	4,894	4,690	4,332	5,441
Summer Semester	1,115	1,315	1,344	1,188	1,180	1,469
Total	13,333	13,797	13,212	12,620	11,944	14,451
% change from previous year		3.5%	-4.2%	-4.5%	-5.4%	21.0%

- Positioning of the OUI in the academic arena:** In today's world of universities and colleges, we realized that our own positioning has not always been clear enough, even though we are clearly designated a university. One of our primary goals in recent years has been to reinforce the "university" element of our image in the public eye. We approached the task on a number of different levels. We were careful to publicize our degrees as university degrees; there was extensive PR in the press and the media; we contacted the Central Bureau of Statistics, Knesset members and relevant government representatives, and clearly explained the OUI and its position; and in particular, we vigorously lobbied the "triumvirate" of the Committee of University Heads, the Planning and Budget Committee (PBC), and the Council of Higher Education (CHE). For the first time since its establishment, the OUI was accepted as an observer in the forum of the Committee of University Heads (<http://www.vera.org.il>) in all areas, and members of our management are now partners to all of the Committee's activities.

We were very active vis-à-vis the CHE and the PBC, and as a result of our efforts, those two bodies established an appropriate approval process for OUI study programs, which made it possible to significantly cut down the time needed for the process. The PBC further approved a special budgeting model for the OUI, to include an incentive component, in addition to the research component of research universities. The 12th Council for Higher Education included one of our own professors.
- Faculty support and the pursuit of excellence:** Improvements to the OUI's positioning as a university were also conducted internally, with a particular focus on senior faculty members, who are the backbone of any university. Developments included reinforcing the status of faculty members by allocating authority to the Senate and other academic bodies, boosting research, recruiting outstanding senior faculty and providing the conditions necessary for success, strengthening the Academic Secretariat, and more. The open excellence-based tender is one example of our efforts to encourage exceptional academics. This open tender enables outstanding researchers to submit their applications to OUI senior faculty at any time, regardless of their academic discipline or of general OUI requirements. Two faculty members have thus far been accepted into the Excellence track after proving their abilities as researchers. They have also been awarded the CHE's prestigious Alon Scholarship.

Other OUI members were also awarded academic prizes and honors and many faculty members were invited to serve on various CHE and Israel Science Foundation disciplinary committees. OUI representatives were appointed as members of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities' Young Scholars Forum in the Humanities and Social Sciences.
- Improving accessibility:** The Open University is deeply committed to improving accessibility to academic studies in a variety of ways. We continue to upgrade student services, promote learning technologies by expanding the options of study formats to suit every

potential student, and help students overcome financial obstacles by offering scholarships to applicants in need. During my five-year term, the 1,000 Scholarships Program for new students was implemented.

- **Intra-organizational processes:** The strengthening of an organization necessitates ongoing examination of organizational processes. My own guiding principle in managing our organization includes three elements: a) the integration of faculty and administration; b) cooperation and mutual consultation; and c) decentralization of authority and responsibility. To implement these processes, I set in motion managerial mechanisms on different levels, each including representatives from the academic and administrative branches: management (President, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Director General); expanded management; management forum (directly subordinate to management); and the President's Forum. Each of these was a partner in providing information, mutual consultation and decision-making, as needed, in trans-organizational matters raised in regular meetings. Some of the changes I had hoped to introduce into intra-organizational processes proved to be difficult to implement, since they were at variance with the traditional OUI approach already in place. Although we cannot claim 100% success, I hope that the seeds were sown and the fruits of our efforts will flourish in the future.

Summing up five years of intensive activity is a difficult challenge indeed. How to describe in mere words the people with whom I spent so much time? How to express the successes and the disappointments; the moments, both great and small, of celebration; the satisfaction and the frustration? It is a truly impossible task, and one I will not attempt. I have tried, in whatever small ways I could, to create order during my term; both for all of you, and for myself.

I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation at being offered the opportunity to serve and to contribute to Israeli society through the Open University – for the Open University, and for its employees. The pride in our eyes at graduation ceremonies is our reward. The thought of seeing that gleam in the eyes of others makes the hard times and the challenges worthwhile. Together, we can all be proud of the Open University and its achievements, from its establishment to the present, and during the past five years in particular. I am positive that the OUI will continue to develop and flourish under the leadership of Professor Kobi Metzer, and I wish him every success.

And finally, I owe the deepest and most heartfelt thanks to the following: The Open University Council, previously headed by Lord Woolf, and now by Justice Dorit Beinisch, President of the Supreme Court (ret.), who replaces Lord Woolf as Chancellor; the Executive Committee, and Chairman Zeev Abeles. I am grateful to all the members of the Council and the various committees for their support, advice and help, and for their personal endeavors on behalf of the University, whenever and wherever they were called upon; thank you to Senate members and Friends of the University; to the Friends Associations and donors in Israel and abroad for their involvement, friendship, and generosity; to all graduates over the years, and to the Graduates Association for being our ambassadors; to the students and Student Union, which is currently celebrating five years of achievement and fruitful cooperation with the University; and last, but not least, I thank my colleagues, both in my own office and in management, whose service alongside me over the past five years went beyond professional collaboration to become true friendship. I consider myself fortunate to have had this privilege.

With very best wishes to you all,


Hagit Messer-Yaron