

Spotlight: Accessibility at the Open University

Accessibility gives students with disabilities independence, and allows them to realize their full potential. Making a study center accessible means more than making the physical entrance convenient. It also covers the full range of services available to students, including guidance, support, counseling, and academic, social/emotional, and technological assistance. Our accessible study centers offer computerized aids and state-of-the-art equipment in classrooms and libraries. Courses are made more accessible through digital audio recordings of texts in Hebrew and English, text enlargement software, word recognition options, help with library use, and training to optimize search software. We offer special accommodations for exams, as well as mediation and guidance on identifying and claiming special entitlements through the university and other institutions (such as the Ministry of Defense and National Insurance Institute). Efforts are being made to increase awareness of disabilities among the student body, faculty, and staff.

The 1998 Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law protects the rights of people with disabilities to take full part in all walks of life, including higher education. Since the law came into effect, the Accessibility to Public Buildings and Places Regulations (2011) and the Accessibility to Service Regulations (2013) have also been enacted. In the coming months, the Knesset is expected to approve regulations on accessibility to public places which are institutions of higher education.

During the 2013-14 academic year, accessibility was a priority for the dean of students. In order to comply with regulations, the university's buildings, public areas, services and websites were assessed. As a result of the survey, all study centers are currently being adapted to meet the needs of people with disabilities. Staff was appointed to handle accessibility issues and an Accessibility Committee was formed, with members representing all OUI departments.

The University offers assistance to students with physical or health-related issues via the Department for Students with Special Needs, which is part of the Office of the Dean of Students, and the Unit for Students with Learning Disabilities. Approximately 650 of our students with hearing, vision, motor skill impairments, or mental-health issues receive assistance which includes information and coordination of services. Accessible study materials, individual tutoring, personal counseling, help in dealing with external agencies, and exam accommodations are some of the services offered.

Over the past two years, the Open University joined the Revolution in Education initiative introduced by the National Insurance Institute (NII) and institutions of higher education. The project saw the establishment of *Tzmicha* Centers at the following campuses: Beit Biram (Haifa); Beit Yatziv (Be'er Sheva); Givat Haviva (Wadi Ara); Mali (Jerusalem); and Ramat Aviv. Learning aids and equipment for students country-wide were purchased through this initiative, and advanced technologies continue to be made available to students and tutors. The project, which will end in October 2014, has been highly successful in helping to improve accessibility at the OUI. The Open University has also introduced a ground-breaking forum for the NII for information, updates, and discussion.

University employees are also required to familiarize themselves with the Service Accessibility Regulations, including practical training. Several events took place during the year to help achieve this goal:

- Together with the Access Israel organization, two Accessibility Days were attended by over four hundred employees.
- Several faculty members from various university departments, as well as administrators, attended Dialogue in the Dark workshops at the Na-Laga'at Center in Jaffa Port, participating in discussions with vision- and hearing-impaired OUI students.
- Graphic artists at the university's publishing house created a highly successful exhibition on the subject of accessibility, which was shown on the first of the two Accessibility Days. Other academic institutes asked to display the exhibition at various access-related events.
- In June, a conference was held, together with Shoham – the Center for Technology in Distance Education – for website content editors (course coordinators / online tutors and any tutor publishing material on course websites). The conference explained the Israeli standard for accessibility of websites and illustrated examples of accessible forms and content on the Internet and on applications.



Posters created for Open University Accessibility Day

- The university's Computer Authority is currently adapting websites open to the general public to a CMS SharePoint platform, built according to accessibility standards (WCAG guidelines from the W3c Worldwide Web Consortium and the adaptations defined by the Standards Institute of Israel).
- Another outcome of the OUI's accessibility policy is that all graduation ceremonies and seminars will now be accessible to the hearing impaired and will include transcripts and sign language interpreters.

A review by the Evaluation Department resulted in the following recommendations to improve accessibility for OUI employees and students:

- Courses and exams for students with special learning needs should be integrated and incorporated into accessible classrooms.
- The homepage of each website should be made accessible.
- Presentations, study and review materials, and summaries of tutorials should be uploaded to course websites, enabling all students, especially those with special learning needs, to prepare for tutorials, follow up on shared content, and review material before exams.
- Awareness should be raised concerning the special learning needs of students in tutorials. Appropriate solutions should be provided.
- Measures should be adopted to raise awareness among all students and employees regarding the needs of students with special learning requirements, and the options available for assistance.